

“The energy of Chinggis Khaan and his wrestlers will be there”

Key religious elements in becoming a successful Mongolian wrestler

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Uskontotiede
Huhtikuu 2019

Tiedekunta/Osasto – Fakultet/Sektion Teologinen		Laitos – Institution Uskontotiede
Tekijä – Författare Jaakko Eelis Akseli mikkola		
Työn nimi – Arbetets titel "The energy of Chinggis Khaan and his wrestlers will be there" – Key religious elements in becoming a successful Mongolian wrestler		
Oppiaine – Läroämne Uskontotiede		
Työn laji – Arbetets art Pro gradu -tutkielma	Aika – Datum 7.4.2019	Sivumäärä – Sidoantal 70
Tiivistelmä – Referat <p>Mongoliassa paini on kansallisurheilulaji ja sillä on yhteyksiä buddhalaisuuteen, shamanismiin ja Tšingis-kaanin kulttiin. Tässä opinnäytetyössä tutkin näitä yhteyksiä ja vastaan kysymykseen: minkälaiset uskonnolliset elementit ovat merkittävässä asemassa, kun pyritään menestymään Mongolipainissa?</p> <p>Mongolipainin suhteesta uskontoon on hyvin vähän aiempaa englanninkielistä tutkimusta ja aiempi tutkimus ei pysty vastaamaan asettamaani tutkimuskysymykseen. Tämän vuoksi tein kenttämatkan Mongoliaan, jossa keräsin uutta aineistoa. Tämän opinnäytetyön tarkoitus on yhdistää aiempi tutkimus uuteen aineistoon.</p> <p>Tässä tutkielmassa käytettävä uusi etnografinen kenttäaineisto on kerätty kesällä 2017 Mongoliassa. Aineisto on kerätty haastattelemalla viittä henkilöä, jotka olivat joko Mongolipainin tai Mongolian uskontojen asiantuntijoita. Haastattelut äänitettiin, litteroitiin ja lopuksi käännettiin englanniksi. Haastatteluaineisto kategorisoitiin käyttämällä teoriasidonnaista sisällönanalyysiä Atlast.ti:n avulla. Uusi materiaali analysoitiin suhteessa aiempaan tutkimukseen, joka osittain tuki ja osittain oli ristiriidassa uuden aineiston kanssa.</p> <p>Analyysi antaa kuvan, jossa useat erilaiset uskonnolliset elementit ovat merkittäviä painijan menestykselle. Tärkeimmät näistä ovat: karma, hiimori (onni), oikeanlainen mielentila, hyvä eettinen toiminta, suojaavat rituaalit, syntymäaika ja sukulaisuussuhteet. Kerätyt haastattelut olivat osittain ristiriidassa keskenään ja ne myös haastoivat aiemman tutkimuksen tuloksia. Tämän vuoksi tulokset sisältävät johtopäätöksiä, jotka eivät ole kaikkien haastateltavien hyväksymiä.</p> <p>Aineistoni antaa uuden näkökulman Mongolipainin ja uskonnon suhteen tutkimukselle. Tutkimuksesta nousee useita uusia ja mielenkiintoisia kysymyksiä, joita ei olisi voinut kysyä ilman keräämääni aineistoa.</p>		
Avainsanat – Nyckelord Paini, kamppailulajit, Mongolia, buddhalaisuus, shamanismi		
Säilytyspaikka – Förvaringställe Helsingin yliopiston kirjasto, Keskustakampuksen kirjasto, Teologia		
Muita tietoja Työ on kirjoitettu englanniksi.		

Faculty Theology		Discipline Study of religion	
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Title "The energy of Chinggis Khaan and his wrestlers will be there." – Key religious elements in becoming a successful Mongolian wrestler			
Subject Study of religion			
Level Masters thesis	Date 7.4.2019	Number of pages 70	
<p>Summary</p> <p>In Mongolia wrestling is the national sport and it is connected to Buddhism, Shamanism and the cult of Chinggis Khaan. This thesis explores these connections and answers the question: What religious elements are key to becoming a successful Mongolian wrestler?</p> <p>There is very little prior research done in English on Mongolian wrestling and its relation to religion, and the research question could not be answered using existing materials. Because of this I made a field trip to Mongolia where I collected new material. The aim of this study is to not only answer the question, but also to incorporate new data into the larger field of studies on Mongolian wrestling.</p> <p>The ethnographic material of my study was collected during the summer of 2017, when I visited Mongolia and interviewed five men who were experts in either wrestling or religion. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and translated. The translations were categorized using theory directed content analysis with the help of Atlas.ti. New data was introduced and analyzed alongside contradicting and supporting elements of prior research.</p> <p>The analysis paints a picture where various religious elements are deemed necessary to becoming a successful Mongolian wrestler. The most relevant are karma, hiimori (luck and fortune), the right state of mind, proper ethical conduct, protective rituals, date of birth and bloodlines. The interviews were contradicting on many occasions, and the prior research was on some points in conflict with the new material. Because of this the results have elements which were not accepted by all of my interviewees.</p> <p>My material provides a new point of view to the research of the relationship between Mongolian wrestling and religion, which were not covered by previous studies. Many new and interesting questions arise from the research project.</p>			
Key words Wrestling, Mongolia, martial arts, Buddhism, Shamanism			
Where deposited City Centre Campus Library, Theology			
Other information Thesis is written in English.			

Content

1. Introduction	1
1.1 Research question and flow of the study	3
2. Method.....	4
2.1 Ethnography	4
2.1.1 Thematic interview	8
2.1.2 Collecting material.....	9
2.2 Content analysis	14
2.3 Introduction of the interviewees	16
3. Background.....	18
3.1 Religion	18
3.1.1 Buddhism.....	20
3.1.2 Mongolian Shamanism.....	22
3.1.3 The cult of Chinggis Khaan	24
3.3 Mongolian wrestling.....	25
3.3 Historical connections of Mongolian wrestling and religion	28
4. Analysis	33
4.1 Born to wrestle: bloodlines and stars	33
4.2 Buddhist philosophy: karma, ethics and the philosophy of mind	34
4.3 Hiimori: acquiring luck and fortune.....	40
4.4 Harming others: rituals of malice and protection	45
4.5 Eagle dance: showing your strength and getting power from imitation.....	47
4.6 Chinggis Khaan: praying to standards while wrestling in Naadam	51
4.7 Animal symbolism: wolf and the ranking system.....	53
4.8 Summary	56
5. Conclusions	59
5.1 Answering the question and painting a portrait	59
5.2 Impact of the results and questions left unanswered	61
Sources and literature	65
Sources.....	65
Interviews and other original material.....	65
Internet sources	65
Literature	66

1. Introduction

During my stay in a training camp for wrestlers, I was told by a Mongolian wrestling coach that I should eat more so that I would become stronger and a better wrestler. This could be understood as a patronizing comment made about my lanky frame at the time, but it was also true, to compete with big men you have to be big. After this comment I jokingly said “if eating and training is all it takes, I will be champion in no time!” and he looked me in the eye and said that it will not be enough, other things are needed. This thesis is about those other things, religious components that can make or break a wrestler.

Mongolia is a nation of roughly 3 million people with a significant historical influence on the entire Eurasian continent. In more recent history it was a socialist state that was a buffer zone for Soviet Union, that underwent a painful transition into a democratic market economy in early 1990's. Today it is situated between two superpowers (China and Russia), that influence Mongolia in a number of ways (Biran 2004, 339-340, 347-361; Buyandelgeriyn 2007, 129-130, 144; Baatarkhuyag & Chih-yu 2014, 37; National statistics office of Mongolia: census¹). Mongolia is also a powerhouse in international wrestling, with several Olympic medals in Freestyle wrestling and a massive number of medals in other international competitions (United world wrestling database: search Mongolia²). This emphasis on wrestling does not concentrate only in Olympic and international sports (like Judo, Freestyle, Greco-Roman and Sumo) but they have their own sport, Mongolian wrestling, which is the national sport of Mongolia. It is part of the three traditional (manly) sports and is very popular with spectators. (Tomikawa 2006, 103; Schofield & Thompson 2007, 332, 341-343). This traditional wrestling sport is the one that I am writing about and even though other wrestling sports are important in Mongolia, they will be mostly excluded from this thesis.

It is clear to everyone familiar with Mongolian wrestling that there is a visible component that goes beyond the athletic, for some reason the wrestlers perform rituals between matches. Those who know more about the Mongolian cultural and

¹ <http://www.en.nso.mn/>

² <https://unitedworldwrestling.org/database>

religious landscape probably have come across the idea that Mongolian wrestlers³ are embodiments of fortune (called *hiimori*) that can be acquired by various means (Humphrey & Ujeed 2012, 152-153). Despite the influence that Mongolians have on the world of wrestling, there is very little scholarly research done on Mongolian wrestling in English. On top of that there is even less written about Mongolian wrestling and religion, even with the obvious connections, so any work dealing with this subject is by default at the forefront of research in this area.

The lack of prior research in English is very problematic but it also encouraged me to study more about Mongolian wrestling and to make a field trip to gather more data. The lack of prior research means that I will have to use works made by few authors and academic papers⁴. I know that there is research done in at least Mongolian, Russian, Japanese and Chinese, but I have no way to access this research due to my poor skill in these languages. The lack of English sources also means that I rely heavily on original material I collected during a field trip in Mongolia in summer 2017. This new material gives a new perspective to the prior research: filling blank spaces, contradicting and validating prior research and giving completely new information. The original material serves as the most significant part of this whole thesis as prior research, that I have access to, cannot answer to the questions that I present. From the point of significance, the field trip and the collected material truly give something new to the (not so large) field of Mongolian wrestling research, and on a wider scope, into the field of Mongolian research. This is also the reason this thesis is written in English and not in my native Finnish.

I myself have practiced martial arts since 2006 (with small stints in the 1990's), including different wrestling sports (in which I have also competed on national level). This background is clearly visible in this study and it must be noted as I

³ I will call wrestlers who compete in Mongolian wrestling as Mongolian wrestlers with a capital M. There is an argument to be made for the use of lower-case letter as other practitioners of martial arts use lower cases in their names (e.g. judoka, sumotori). Using the lower case would also allow me to differentiate between Mongolians (nationals) who wrestle and people who practice Mongolian wrestling but are not necessary Mongolian. In the end every time I reference to Mongolian wrestlers they are always Mongolians, so this is not an issue.

⁴ Notable mentions would be Krist (2014) who writes about Mongolian wrestling and religion, Humphrey et al. (multiple in 2012 with different co-authors) who writes about *hiimori* (luck and fortune) and Tomikawa (2004, 2006) who writes about Mongolian wrestling.

might have information and biases rising from this. It (and other factors, like my gender) also gave me access and possibilities during the field trip that might not have been possible to people with different backgrounds. So it is clear that the results I collected during the field trip (and present in this study) are probably not replicable in a clear manner. I have also written my bachelor's thesis⁵ about Mongolian wrestling and religion just using prior literature made by others.

1.1 Research question and flow of the study

The aim of the study is to incorporate my original ethnographic material into the field of Mongolian research as I will test prior research against my own findings. While doing this I will answer the research question:

What kind of religious elements are key to becoming a successful Mongolian wrestler?

Success as a wrestler is here defined by the ability to win competitive Mongolian wrestling matches. In this way I limit the scope of this study to those who are currently or have competed in the past. I do realize that a wrestler could be thought to be successful based on other factors (like his performance in training camps or by his ability to teach others to wrestle), but these factors are best studied separately.

The question will be answered with a systematic theory directed content analysis of the data I collected. Prior research serves as a directing force that gives categories for the analysis, but it is also used at times to support or contradict the findings from my collected data. This way the new information will connect with the old and my answers become part of the larger field of Mongolian (wrestling) studies. The collected data by itself is in no way fully replicable and it cannot be a base for generalizations, but in time as a part of the larger field it can fill gaps and be a base from which these generalizations could be made. But for now the research question will be answered only with a disclaimer that says "according to my material".

⁵ Kun pyhät jättiläiset kohtaavat: Mongolipainin suhde uskontoon (2015) eng. When the holy giants meet: relationship of Mongolian wrestling and religion.

The thesis is presented in following manner: first I will introduce the method (ethnography with emphasis on thematic interviews) used for collecting the material, followed by an overview of the real collection process with some ethical discussion. After this comes the method (theory directed content analysis) used to analyze the material with introduction of the interviewees. From here start the background chapters where I present a basic overview of religion in Mongolia and the basics of Mongolian wrestling and its history. The fourth main chapter is the analysis where I use the methods described in previous chapters and present my findings and doing so answer the research question. The final chapter is the conclusion where I discuss my findings, open questions that were left unanswered and new questions that arise from this study.

2. Method

I will first present the methods that were used for collecting original field material and the concrete process of collecting data in the field. After this, comes the method that I used to analyze the original material and earlier research. In the end of this chapter I will introduce the interviewees, who provided most of the original data.

2.1 *Ethnography*

In this chapter I will first discuss the ethnographic approach I used for my thesis. The emphasis will be in the interview method and the description of the whole research process step by step and how the ethnographic methods were applied during the research process.

Ethnographic studies are usually defined as studies that are based on data collected through observation in the field. This approach is not only descriptive, but also reflective and dialogic, where the research constantly changes directions and is sometimes unpredictable. The research is guided by the researcher who defines the research questions, research methods, interpretations and definition of the field of research. As such, one of the main characteristics of an ethnographic study is to make visible the choices made by the researcher. In this way the research material and process can be reviewed by the larger scientific community. (Hämeenaho & Koskinen-Koivisto 2014, 7-9)

The bulk of my research data is comprised of interviews. Other observations were collected into a field journal that I wrote during my field trip as well as photos and videos. To make all my choices and interpretations visible I will write the theoretical background and parallel to it the data collection process as described in my field journal.

Ethnographic studies are based on field work, where data is collected amongst and with the research subjects. It should be noted that the field is not a singular place (or a field in reality) but it is constructed by different spaces, meetings, situations and archived materials that the researcher uses during research. The process of field work can be described as hermeneutic, where the information is gathered in an interactive way between the researcher and the subjects, but the interpretations are based on the researcher's interpretations and (or of) the world view of the subjects. The interpretations are always bound into a cultural context. (Hämeenaho & Koskinen-Koivisto 2014, 13-14)

My trip to Mongolia took two months (of which 34 days were in Mongolia) and the field of my ethnography is composed mainly of that time and place, still the emphasis was on couple key locations and interactions. Also I consider all the interactions with my translators that I had after the trip to be part of the field that I am studying, and all prior research that I have read.

The key interactions in my field were with the interviewees, that I had five in total, with whom I had nine recorded conversations. In addition to the interviews I had some informal conversations with the interviewees, random people and more importantly with the translators, who gave valuable information about many subjects. The most important observations I made in two different locations, in a camp (in the countryside) for wrestlers training for Naadam⁶ and the National Naadam in Ulaanbaatar. The observations were recorded in field notes, videos and photos, but these are used in very limited manner.

⁶ The annual Naadam festival is in the center of Mongolian festivities. It is a sporting and cultural event (or it has multiple different sporting events), where wrestlers compete. It has its roots in training the ancient skills of hunting and warfare, but there are also spiritual components. (Matheson & Thompson 2008, 1; Thompson 2009, 7)

My knowledge of Mongolian culture and language was somewhat limited and I am unable to decipher or understand all the cultural implications, meanings or sayings. So I am unable to follow possible leads and hints that my data probably has and I am limited to interpret the translations made by the local translators and my own observations that were made through Finnish eyes.

Fingerroos & Jouhki (2014, 84-85) state that the interaction between researcher and the research subjects might be different based on ethnicity, gender etc., which was clearly visible during my trip. The wrestling camp I visited had a rule of no women (even though I saw a woman working there) and so my gender clearly played a role during my field research as I was able to visit places unavailable for women. Also, my background as a practitioner of martial arts (including wrestling) gave me access and understanding of the physical culture that the wrestlers were part of. This eased the interactions and observations in the wrestling camp and I could participate in some of their routines (like playing football) and talk with the wrestlers about issues, questions and matters that they were interested and familiar about.⁷

Ethical principles of research are especially important during ethnographic research. While working with real people who might release sensitive or controversial information there are more things to take into consideration. The researcher has to ask questions like: How has the informant/interviewee been informed about the research and its goals? Can this information be used against the informants/interviewees during or after the release of the study? How has personal information been disclosed? Are there potential consequences for the informant/subject, society or the researcher if the research is published? To address these and other similar questions American Anthropological Association has given a statement on ethics, which begins with “1. DO NOT HARM”. This should be used as a rule that cannot be altered. After it is sure that you are not harming directly or indirectly the informants/subjects (or the field and society around it) the research can go on. There is of course the question of defining what harm means in every particular situation and this is for the researcher to argue. (Fingerroos & Jouhki 2014, 93-96)

⁷ Also my height (I'm 197cm tall) was a constant source of amusement and several comments were made about it, which might have had some cultural importance that I missed.

For these reasons I shall not use any names in this study and I keep my interviewees and translators anonymous. There might be a risk for identification through the pictures and videos that I use, so I will not use them. I always asked for permission to use the material and explained my research and its goals (some people seemed even irritated by the length of my explanation). Some conversations I was not allowed to record, but later I was given the permission to use my notes of the conversations if the informant remained anonymous. As the interviewees remain anonymous I have concluded that there should be no harm done for them (or Mongolian society at large). Still I need to point out again that my knowledge of Mongolian culture is limited, and this might lead to misunderstandings that might even seem blasphemous to some (as wrestling and religion are a serious matter in Mongolia), but unfortunately I have no ability to evaluate this. The shortcomings of my research ethics I will discuss later.

One of the most important things to note is that ethnographic observations always go hand in hand with subjective interpretation. It is almost impossible to observe and describe something without a single preconception about it. Interpretation begins with naming things and people/interviewees (for example a “cell phone” or a “smartphone”) and these interpretations have an impact on observations. (Ehn 2014, 74.) This was clear with my observations, as I had read all the previous research that I could find in English and have a background in martial arts, my observations were made through a specific viewpoint. This was also clear with the pictures and videos that I took as I only recorded situations I judged to be important.

Field work concludes once sufficient data has been gathered. This “saturation point” is generally thought to have been reached when data begins to show signs of repetition and does not give any new valuable information (in the context of the research question). It is possible to reach this point with a limited amount of interviews and strictly defined textual material, if the researcher is not aiming for a quantitative presentation. In this kind of study the aim is not in making new universal generalizations but to find new evidence and relations from strictly defined material and questions. (Fingerroos & Jouhki 2014, 103-104)

The saturation point in this instance was reached during the last two interviews I made. The interviewees (one of them was a first-time interviewee) were giving answers I had heard before. Because of this and time restraints on my Visa, I decided to stop collecting new field material. From this kind of very small/limited material it is impossible to make universal generalizations, but it can be used to challenge and/or verify the information from prior research as it is one of my goals. It can also be used to answer the research questions within the context of this study. The ethnographic material I collected is just a small stream in the branch of science that is studying Mongolian wrestling and Mongolian religion or culture.

2.1.1 Thematic interview

As there was a limited amount of material available on Mongolian wrestling in English, there was a great demand for new empirical material that could be used to explain the relation between Mongolian wrestling and religion. This attracted my interest and I decided to collect new empirical material in the field. Different interview methods appeared to be most suitable and powerful tools for this kind of research.

Interview is one of the basic methods for collecting research material for a study. It is a very flexible and versatile method that can be used for many different purposes. An interview is essentially a conversation between an interviewer and an interviewee that takes place for research purposes. One can conduct interviews in various ways, ranging from asking strict questions to open themes, depending on the goals, circumstances and focus of the study (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2008, 11). I decided to follow the thematic interview method as introduced by Hirsjärvi & Hurme (2008) which will be my focus in this method chapter.

Interview is a research subject focused method for collecting material and content. This means that the subject (interviewee) makes the first interpretation of the research subject, before the researcher (interviewer), while answering the questions. In contrast to observation where the researcher makes the first interpretations about the subject that he is researching. Interviews and observations are good example of methods that support each other, as one gives a

first-hand view to the subject and the other offers an outside view. In qualitative research interviews alone are seldom used to complete a study but rather are combined with other methods. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2008, 37-39) Interview methods provide material and text that can be used, but all of that is void without an analysis method that brings out results from the material. Interviews are free from a single method of analysis which allows the collected information to be used in many different ways, ranging from different kinds of content analysis' and discourse analysis' to all the way to calculable quantitative methods.

The strengths and weaknesses of interview method can be summarized as follows: First an interview can deepen and clarify understanding about previously known subjects. It can also link the material produced into a broader context or give us some entirely new information about a subject (or a context!). On the other hand good interviews take time, skill, experience and training. Conducting interviews may also require an investment of not only time but money as well. Interviews also may contain misinformation (for example the interviewee might be lying or may misunderstand the question). The analysis of extensive and complicated interview material can be demanding. A competent interviewer recognizes these facts and knows the research subject thoroughly before doing the interviews. S/he is also clear, open and trustworthy. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2008, 35, 68)

Thematic interview is one form of semi-structured interview. It is not fully structured as the interviewer and the interviewee are not bound by a strict set of questions, and there are no predefined options for answers. In thematic interview the interviewer has some pre-existing information about the subject and some presumptions based on it. Based on those presumptions and the information, the interviewer creates a basic framework of themes that the interview will follow. Thus the interviewee has an opportunity to say freely what she thinks about the subject at hand, within the theme (or frame) that the interviewer has set up. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2008, 47-48)

2.1.2 Collecting material

For my research I made a 34-day research trip to Mongolia in summer of 2017 where I interviewed five different individuals that could be described as experts in

the field of Mongolian wrestling or Mongolian religion. I also observed Mongolian wrestling as well as rituals linked to wrestling and training, recording my observations in the form of field notes. In this chapter I describe the theoretical background and the concrete process of making interviews including all the problems that occurred during the field trip.

Before conducting an interview study, the researcher must answer two questions: what is the subject and what is the method? The best means of answering these questions is a research plan, where one lays out all the goals for the study, prior research, problems, assumptions and the position of the researcher. Additionally, the research plan should include a plan for the gathering of information, estimates on the necessary resources and a schedule for the study. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2008, 54-57) I had written my bachelor's thesis on Mongolian wrestling and had read all the English material I could find before leaving, so I had some prior knowledge about the subject. Based on this knowledge I formulated my research plan, containing the themes I wanted to discuss with my interviewees. In contrast to a pure thematic interview I also made a long list of specific questions so as to always be prepared for a potential interview.

One of the significant challenges for an interview-based study is to define the group of people to be interviewed. The basic assumption in a thematic interview is that all interviewees have witnessed or experienced the same phenomenon or the same chain of events. The number of interviewees depends on the subject to be studied and the method used to analyze the collected material. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2008, 47-58) Before leaving I could not make any contact into Mongolia, even though I wrote various emails, I never received any answer. Because of this I had problems deciding the groups of people I would interview. Without knowing what would be plausible (as the high ranking wrestlers are superstars) I decided to interview anyone who can be described as an expert in Mongolian wrestling or religion.

After the groups to be interviewed have been defined the crucial question is how to reach these individuals? In some cases the researcher can just make direct contact with them (emails, face-to-face contact, letters etc.) but often this is not possible. In such cases you might want to make contact with an organization

orsociety that connects the interviewees and the interviewer (for example if you want to interview churchgoers, you could contact a parish to identify them). (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2008, 83) After arriving in Mongolia, getting in touch with anyone was a problem for me as no organisation or individual linked to wrestling would answer my inquiries. As there was no contact with anyone I decided to use the direct method and just walk up to people and ask for an interview. When I arrived in Ulaanbaatar Mongolia I hired an interpreter from American Center for Mongolian Studies and walked into different locations asking for interviews. Using this method, I was able to acquire two interviews with local monks (lamas), both teachers at the Gandan Monastery school for advanced religious studies.

After interviewing the monks I seemed to be in a dead end as I was still unable to make any contact with local wrestlers or shamans. I had used all the methods that Hirsjärvi & Hurme (2008) suggest, with no luck. The wrestling schools were closed and all the wrestlers were on training camps outside Ulaanbaatar preparing for the biggest competitions of the year, Naadam festivals. Likewise all the shamans seemed to be out of town for some summer rituals that were taking place at the same time. The next interviewees were found by pure chance through a friend that I had met on the train to Ulaanbaatar. Through her I was introduced to a man who had been a wrestler in the past. He knew a man who trained wrestlers and could take me to a training camp where I would be able to conduct interviews. This trainer became my main source of information and he also made it possible for me to observe the training of the wrestlers. While visiting his training camp I was able to interview two provincially (aimag) ranked wrestlers, including the trainer. The last interviewee was found by my interpreter who happened to be friends with someone who had shamans in her family. With her I met a shaman who was her relative. The last interviewee was crucial as he bound together all the other interviews that I had made. In short, pure luck and chance encounters had a big role while getting the interviewees for this study.

There are ethical, juridical and customary rules that guide the interview process. During the interview the interviewer and the interviewee usually submit to the normal rules that mark our everyday interactions, like no stealing or violence. On top of the normal rules of interaction, the interviewer is expected to keep professional confidentiality and work inside the etiquette rules that guide the

context where the interviewee resides. For example in Mongolia it is customary to give money as a gift, but in Finland it would usually be interpreted as corruption. On the other hand there is an assumption that the interviewee should speak the truth and answer the questions honestly. But unfortunately this is not always the case and the interviewee might give false answers due to multiple reasons. For example he might think that the interviewer wants to hear something specific, and answers accordingly. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2008, 101-102)

During the interviews there were some ethical and practical issues that I have to address. First, I had to pay money (and other goods) for most of the interviews. This might be interpreted to be just a custom in Mongolia or a violation of research ethics (corruption), but in either case it rises some questions: What were the motives for the interviewees? If they just wanted money from me, how likely are their accounts to be accurate or truthful? Would different amounts of money given different answers? Some wrestlers denied interviews with me as I did not give them my shoes (for some reason they wanted my old wrestling shoes) or large amounts of cash. Secondly the translations during the interviews were incomplete and inaccurate in some cases. This made some of the interviews less fruitful than they might have been with better expertise. The mistranslations and inability to translate had a central role during conversations that required special knowledge about wrestling or religion. Thirdly I accumulated more information about the research subject during the interviews, which helped me in the later interviews. Because of this process I discovered that I had not asked about some really interesting and relevant questions in the first interviewees.

Recording is crucial for thematic interviews. To create an atmosphere where the interviewee feels free to converse openly it is advisable to avoid unnecessary breaks caused by writing notes. For the same reason it would be good for the interviewer to know the set of themes, that he uses as a guide for the interview, by heart so there is as little paper checking and reading as possible. The recording device seldom disturbs the interviewees. Recording preserves quite a lot information and gives the researcher the ability to come back to the interview in a way that written notes do not. Even if the notes are a word-for-word record of what the interviewee said (which is generally not plausible), they do not give an indication of tone of voice, breathing, rate of speech and other information that

might be valuable. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2008, 92-93) I recorded the interviews in an audio format, which was a necessity because the translations were so inaccurate during the interviews. Video would have been the best format as some of the interviewees made hand gestures or demonstrated moves, but the budget for the study (and the skills of the researcher) did not allow this.

After the interview recordings have been collected, they need to be transcribed and analyzed in some way. Usually the recordings are transcribed in way that is relevant for the study and the method used to analyze the material. One can transcribe the whole recording word for word, include the length of pauses and yawns if the method for analysis requires that. On the other hand the transcription might be made out of just the necessary parts that are needed for the analysis. As there is no single right method for transcribing it needs to be done under the supervision of the desired analysis method asking: what kind of written material is necessary for this study? (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 137-141) For this study all the interviews were transcribed word for word, both in Mongolian and in English. After this all the Mongolian parts were retranslated with a small commentary in some places from the translator.

The transcribing process brought up some of the problems mentioned before along with some new ones. Without proper funding I had trouble finding a competent translator who could translate all the Mongolian parts (again) in writing. After finding a reliable transcriber (third one that I contracted for the job) who also translated all the interviews again I realized that there had been many cases where my question and following answer had been, so to speak, lost in translation. This made it impossible to examine the collected field material in detail, before the complete translations were made. Completing the translations and transcripts took over a year from the point when I contacted the first transcriber.

In addition to interviews I made observations throughout my time in Mongolia. I recorded all major observations in a field journal, where I also kept track of the whole experience. The main observations were made during my visits to a training camp for wrestlers and during the Naadam festival in Ulaanbaatar which I attended on 11. and 12. of July to see the opening ceremony and all the wrestling

matches. I have included some of my observations into the thesis as they revealed some new details that did not come up during the interviews.

2.2 Content analysis

Content analysis is a basic method for analyzing material and it can be used in almost all qualitative research. One can analyze nearly all text-based material, and other materials that have been made into text, like recordings that have been transcribed. Content analysis can be executed in various different ways. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2002, 93; Eskola 2007, 162). The goal of qualitative content analysis can be described as follows: to find a way for an interpretation for the content of the text at hand, through a systematic process of coding (categorizing) and identifying themes and/or patterns. (Hsieh & Shannon 2005, 1278) In this thesis I began with the method that Eskola (2007) describes as *teoriasidonnainen sisällönanalyysi* (theory bound content analysis) which is extremely close to the directed content analysis introduced by Hsieh & Shannon (2005). The resemblance of these two methods is so prevalent that I am using them conjoined as one method to analyze the text-based material that I have. From this point on I call this method theory directed content analysis (TDCA) even though Eskola (2007) uses a different Finnish term to describe his method.

Theory directed content analysis is a good method for analysing a phenomenon that has prior research on it, which is still incomplete or in need of further description. The key is that the prior research that can be validated or extended with new material. The existing theory helps to focus the research question(s) and provides different kinds of predictions for the new study. (Hsieh & Shannon 2005, 1281) The new empirical text-based material is connected to theoretical terms, that have mainly been introduced in prior research. The analysis has theoretical connections, but it does not have to be based entirely in prior theory. After using this method there should be a synthesis of prior research and the new material used. (Eskola 2007, 162-164)

In practice, theory directed content analysis deals in categorizing (coding) the material researched. Prior research is used to further help this categorizing and several of the categories come straight from prior research, but there may be

completely new categories (or sub-categories) that arise from the new material. The categorizing itself is a process where the researcher reads the text and marks all the relevant parts that correspond with different categories. This can be done for example by highlighting different parts with different colours according to different categories. (Hsieh & Shannon 2005, 1282-1283) In my study, where the task is to discover how religion and Mongolian wrestling are connected, some of these predetermined categories are rising from previous studies made about Shamanism and Buddhism. There has been prior research on how the two are connected and while I read the material I can just highlight the parts (with different colours)⁸ that cover each subject. In addition to these categories there appears to be material that relates to the research question, but that does not arise from previous research, like training in holy or auspicious places.

All in all, theory directed content analysis is about finding out exactly what a given text holds. In this study I use TDCA for that purpose so I can combine the material that I collected with the existing research. In addition to this I created new categories and subcategories that arise from the material and have not been discussed (or have been discussed in different context) in prior research. After categorizing the results are presented in this paper with some exemplary quotes from the collected interviews. As Hsieh & Shannon (2005, 1282) suggest, all the findings are presented in the guidance of prior research, so it can be contradicted, refined and enriched in a way that is relevant to the field of Mongolian wrestling studies.

Theory-driven content analysis holds some problems. First, there is a strong bias in the way researchers approach the data. This leads to the fact that researchers are more likely to find evidence that is supportive to the prior theory rather than contradictory. Second, the overemphasis of the theory (and prior research) may blind the researcher to some context that is related to the research subject but has not been discussed before. (Hsieh & Shannon 2005, 1283) In summary, the researcher might be searching for the wrong things in the text because overly relying on the context and discourse of prior theory and research. Acknowledging and identifying these biases gives an opportunity to reduce their effect on this thesis, so I have taken a critical perspective on prior research. Still I feel that

⁸ I used Atlas.ti, for the categorization of my data.

TDCA is a necessity (and a safe choice) for properly integrating new data with old one in a context, where there is a high risk for the researcher to understand cultural meanings in a wrong way.⁹

2.3 Introduction of the interviewees

In this chapter I will briefly introduce all the experts that I interviewed during my field research. I will present all the relevant information about the interviewees and the interviews that I conducted with them. I have given them all coded names, that I will use through the whole thesis. The information presented in these introductions is based on the time of the interviews, June and July of 2017.

Trainer is a 40-year-old man who was my main source of information. I conducted three interviews with him during three different occasions, twice in the training camp and once in Ulaanbaatar. His introduction to wrestling came at a very young age at 1987 (10 years, third grade in Mongolia). He started wrestling in a club in 1995 (22 years ago) and had a successful wrestling career as he was able to obtain the highest rank possible at the provincial (aimag)¹⁰ level, the lion of aimag. He also managed to earn some money during his wrestling career, but it was mostly used by his family. He does not work full time with wrestling and has another job during the off season.¹¹

He began training other wrestlers 10 years ago (the training camp I visited was run by him). In addition, he had been teaching wrestling to competitors during the Naadam preparation¹² for the past 17 years. At the camp he ran in the summer of 2017 there were many ranked wrestlers, the highest-ranked being a national hawk (ranked 5.-8. in the whole nation).

Although I call him Trainer he also has worked as a judge in provincial and military level wrestling matches. I actually witnessed some of his judging work

⁹ As I was unable to speak Mongolian properly, I was not native to the Mongolian wrestling (or Mongolian religious) scene and my prior knowledge came from English literature.

¹⁰ There are 21 aimags in Mongolia and there will be one champion from all of them each year (with one being the national champion competing in Ulaanbaatar). To acquire the rank of aimag lion, the tournament must have at least 256 participants.

¹¹ He gives two different dates for the start of his wrestling career, 1987 and 1995.

¹² Before big competitions wrestlers usually come together into big training camps where they prepare for the event.

through television as some matches that he had been judging were broadcasted during my stay in Mongolia.

Wrestler is a 28-year-old man, who had been wrestling for ten years and had an aimag nanching (won five rounds during a provincial ranked competition) rank. There were also many other wrestlers in his family and his father held the same rank as him. He had wrestled professionally but at the time of the interviews he had another job. He described himself as being somewhat religious and I had one interview with him at the wrestling camp.

First Lama is a 47-year-old man who had been a Buddhist monk since 1989 (but he also stated that he had been a monk for 22 years). He was a teacher at the Buddhist university in Ulaanbaatar and had studied in India. He was introduced to us by other monks who thought that he would know more as he was a teacher (and spoke good English). With him I had two interviews at the Naadam monastery in Ulaanbaatar.

Second Lama is a 40-year-old man who had been a Buddhist monk for 27 years and at the time of the interviews he was working in a Buddhist university in Ulaanbaatar, teaching Tibetan literature. Like First lama we were introduced to him as he “knew more” and was willing to give an interview (even partially in English). He was interviewed once at the Naadam monastery in Ulaanbaatar.

Shaman is a 61-year-old man who had been a shaman for 27 or 28 years (also stated that since 1987, so 30 years during the interviews). He had become shaman after an illness (what would be diagnosed liver cancer and arthritis) that would not heal before he accepted his spirits. He is a 7th generation shaman in his family and was trained by a woman who was his father’s relative. He had also practiced some Mongolian wrestling while younger. With him I had two interviews at the outskirts of Ulaanbaatar.¹³

¹³ His background was strikingly similar to stories about other Mongolian shamans. For example the story of shaman Jigid, as told by ethnographer Buyandelgeriyn (1999, 221-224), has the same exact crucial elements, like a terminal illness that could not be healed without becoming a shaman.

3. Background

This chapter will introduce the basic context needed to understand the analysis done in later chapters. First I will introduce the relevant Mongolian religious landscape and its history. After that comes the basics of Mongolian wrestling and the relevant historical progress and turning points.

3.1 Religion

In this chapter I will introduce the Mongolian religions that are important for this study. Some concepts and definitions rise from previous research and are crucial for this study, but they are not commonly known so I must elaborate on them. The religions that I will describe are Buddhism, Mongolian shamanism and the cult of Chinggis Khaan.¹⁴

To make use of all of my material I have taken a nativist (emic) approach to religion and in this study I consider everything religious that the interviewees said to be religious. Also I consider all of the answers they gave me, when asked a question about religion (for example religious customs), to contain religious content. Also all the things prior research mentions to be religious I will be considering religious. This means that I give no proper definition to religion in this study, I realize that this might cause some problems (like if the interviewees themselves consider different things religious) and this must be taken into account while reading this thesis.¹⁵ I also use the terms religious qualities, abilities and rituals so I will present short definitions for all of these.

Religious qualities mean qualities that are present in a (interviewees) worldview because of religion. There might be a quality named “tallness” or “luck” that means you have something in you that helps you in your life. If these qualities are not gained through religious means, for example if being tall is a quality that is gained through genes, it is not religious. But if you are tall because of the will of the gods, it is a religious quality. Also qualities gained from practicing religion and doing religious rituals are religious qualities in this study. So if you get luck from doing rituals according to shamanistic beliefs this luck is a religious quality.

¹⁴ I use the written form of Chinggis Khaan as it is closer to the original Mongolian way to pronouncing the name, instead of the commonly used English version Genghis Khan.

¹⁵ For more about problems and definitions see NÄRVÄ 2014

Religious abilities are then abilities that are present in (interviewees) worldviews that have a form of religious thinking (“religion” as defined above) and these abilities must be gained and/or explained through religious thinking. So a religious worldview might have an ability called “wrestling skill” that means a person’s ability to win wrestling matches. If this ability comes just from training wrestling, then I will not consider it a religious ability. But if there is a spirit (that the interviewee links to religion) that gives you that power, then it is a religious ability. Religious abilities also encompass abilities that rise and are gained from practicing religion and doing religious rituals. So if you gain the ability to win matches by reading Buddhist mantras you have a religious ability.

As can be seen above qualities and abilities are really close to each other. The main difference about them in this study is that abilities are skills (or they refer to a skill) that usually can be learned. Qualities on the other hand are not skills, but something other. They can be inherent capabilities that help in certain tasks (like being tall) but they are not something you can be skilful at (so you cannot be skilful at tallness).

In this study I use the work of Catherine Bell (1992) to define ritual so it is clear what I mean when I write about rituals and wrestling. According to Bell (1992) Rituals can be seen as acting with purpose and producing these acts is called ritualization. Ritualization, which includes a set of movements, gestures and sounds, can be described as acting in a way that sets the act apart from other ways of acting just by virtue of the way in which it does what it does. So the act itself is the thing that makes it different from other acts. Ritualization also aligns one with the ultimate sources of power, through series of relationships and associations. As one taps into this power through ritualization there is a practical sense of empowerment or disempowerment that suggests a place in the coherence of cosmos where one takes a particular place. The ritualized practices are effective ways of working under some cultural circumstances and are in contrast with ordinary actions which in turn are spontaneous and practical (or both). Rituals are often described as routinized, habitual, obsessive or mimetic. (Bell 1992, 14, 140-141) Rituals will be considered religious in this study if the interviewees (or prior

researchers) have made this distinction or if the ritual is clearly connected to a religion.

Rituals are generally thought (at least in the mind of researchers) to have a close association with beliefs. They are thought to express beliefs in symbolic ways for the reaffirmation of these beliefs. (Bell 1992, 182.) Even though this has been the case I will not go deeply into the associations or the underlying beliefs as this was not possible with the material that I have. Still there are some ideas about beliefs behind the acts, in prior English literature, that I will challenge with my interview material.

Bell (1992, 170) states that rituals are concerned with power, and they might be seen as exercise of power in certain social orders. The main focus with rituals that I write about will be in those that give the participant power to win a wrestling match. In the mind of the wrestler the rituals might mean real actual power, but it can also be seen as participation of power relationships in cultural context, which is not in the scope of this study.

3.1.1 Buddhism

In this chapter I provide a short historical introduction of Mongolian Buddhism. Its main purpose is to give the reader basic background and historical knowledge of Buddhism. There will be no introduction to creed or specific rituals as the important ones are expanded on in later chapters where I analyze the interviews.

The major Buddhist influence in Mongolia started in 16th century but it had already arrived from Tibet during the 13th century. Mongolians started to mix their own folk and shamanistic beliefs to the Buddhist tradition, and so was conceived the form of Buddhism that can be called Mongolian Buddhism. Some researchers consider this to be a part of Tibetan Buddhism¹⁶, even though it has taken many influences from the pre-Buddhist religious traditions (such as the position of Chinggis Khaan). (Wallace 2015a, xv-xvii) The link between Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhism was quite clear while I made my field trip, as both lamas I interviewed had been studying abroad at some point in Tibetan Buddhist schools

¹⁶ Especially in older research e.g. Serruys (1980, 392).

in Tibet. Anyhow I will treat Mongolian Buddhism as an independent religion without discussing much about its connections to Tibetan Buddhism.

The first wave of Buddhism came to Mongolia when Kublai Khaan and his court converted to Buddhism in 1242. The motif behind this conversion was mainly political, as Kublai had moved the capital of the Mongolian Empire to Peking and he was trying to strengthen his position by converting to a more widely accepted religion. (Smith 2015, 161) The influence of Buddhism among the Mongols was expired when Mongols lost their power and land in China in 1368 (Heissig 1980, 25).

Second wave of Buddhism came in 16th century as Althan Khaan invited a Buddhist lama from Tibet to Mongolia. He gave this lama the name Dalai Lama (whose lineage is still alive). This started a tidal wave of Buddhist missionary work and by the end of 16th century there were new monasteries and laws in Mongolia to promote this progress. This trajectory continued during the Manchu rule from 17th century onwards. (Heissig 1980, 26-27, 29-33)

While Buddhism spread the old religions did not disappear. Old rituals, folk heroes, deities and beliefs were dressed in a Buddhist costume and incorporated into the Buddhist creed. It could be said that the Mongols still see Buddhism through the lens of the earlier folk beliefs. (Heissig 1980, 1; Lekshe Tsomo 2015, 262; Wickham-Smith 2015, 161)

The arrival of communism into Mongolia stopped the advancement of Buddhism. The influence of the Buddhist clergy was a severe problem for the socialist government. This “lama question” (*lam naryn asuudal*) was to be solved by anti-Buddhist legislation and violence. Up to one in five lamas was killed in 1937 to 1939 and most of the monasteries were destroyed or converted for other use (like storages). Many of the executed lamas were high ranking teachers who were purged as counter revolutionaries. (Rupen 1959, 332-333; Sneath & Kaplonski 2010, 1006-1008; Kaplonski 2015, 243-245) Buddhism remained a public religion in only one or two government sanctioned monasteries and only a minority of Mongolians practiced the religion privately. As the new laws prohibited people from doing religious services for others (excluding the government ran

monasteries) so the lamas lost their religious status in the Mongolian society. (Rosenberg 1998, 170)

After the fall of socialism in the 1990's there has been a religious renaissance that has been defined by rise of Buddhism, even though other religions are also gaining significance in Mongolia (Balogh 2010, 238). This rise can be described as reviving a religion that was greatly disrupted and fragmented during the socialist era, but still seen as an integral part of the Mongolian identity, even though many Mongolians know very little about it. (Elverskog 2006, 29)

3.1.2 Mongolian Shamanism

In this chapter I will give a short historical introduction to Mongolian shamanism. I will not go deeper into the belief system as all the relevant information for my research will be introduced during the analysis. I will use sources that concentrate on Mongolia and not generally or universally on shamanism.

Shamanism was one of the oldest religions among the Mongol people. It wasn't first regarded as an independent religion, but it was part of bigger religious picture where the sky (*tngri*) was worshiped. (Jagchid & Hyer 1979, 163-164) Up to 13th century the shamanic practice was the dominant religion in Mongolia and there might have even been a "state shaman" like mentioned in the Secret History of Mongols (Purev & Purvee 2012, 40, 42).

Although there had been contact with Buddhism before the 13th century, the ideological rivalry seemed to be in favour of shamanism. This changed by the rule of Kublai Khaan and the influence of shamanism on the state and its officials began to decline, in favour of Buddhism. (Purev & Purvee 2012, 42)

The decline continued in the next couple of centuries and by the end of 16th century there were laws (in certain places) that banned shamanic rituals (including burials) and enforced Buddhist ceremonies. The Buddhist lamas were set to be officials of the state while shamanic idols were to be burned. Shamans became persecuted and their customs restricted as Buddhist lamas gained economical and political power. (Purev & Purvee 2012, 53-54)

While Buddhism continued its triumph over shamanism, large parts of shamanic beliefs were incorporated into Buddhist belief system (creed). Shamans were said to be reborn lamas, rituals followed shamanic traditions and even some rituals were conducted together by a lama and a shaman. This progress made a division into the Mongolian shamanic practitioners as some of them retained their original customs and rejected the influence of Buddhism and others made rituals in the name of Buddhist amulets. The ones who rejected Buddhism were to be known as black shamans and the others as yellow shamans (Purev & Purvee 2012, 55-57, 61, 64.)

Communism did not do any favours for shamanism as it was banned for about 60 years from 1930's onwards, still some rituals and initiations were done in secret. This and the spread of Buddhism eradicated shamanism among the Khalkha Mongols (the largest ethnic group in Mongolia). Shamanic traditions were conserved among some of the ethnic minorities and now most (if not all) shamans trace their lineage (pupil-teacher) to some of these minorities. (Balogh 2010, 230-234)

After the fall of socialism in the 1990's shamanism has gained a role in Mongolian society as a religious activity. For example the Mongolian president has taken part of shamanistic rituals made by the "state shaman" (*töörin zaarin*) Byambadorjin. There are plenty of small shamanic centers, associations and healing enterprises, that have appeared after the fall of socialism. A number of these modern shamans have even their own offices and staff. (Balogh 2010, 229, 235-236.) Anyhow the shamans were quite hard to find during my field trip even though they have several associations. The offices might not have been more than a room with a telephone and not many people were available for connection. There was even one shaman who had advertisements but unfortunately he had died just before I contacted him.

It is important to note that Mongolian Shamanism is not a single homogenous religion with a closed set of rituals and beliefs. It could be argued that it is (and historically was) a religious phenomenon, not a religion by itself, that has various individuals acting as spiritualist specialists. (Bumochir 2014, 478-481)

3.1.3 The cult of Chinggis Khaan

In this chapter I will introduce the (state) cult that has formed around Chinggis Khaan, as it is important for the analysis. I consider this to be a religion (by the definition Introduced earlier) as the cult is not centered around the historical figure, but around a mythical man who is not just exemplary, but someone who people can pray upon.

The role of Chinggis Khaan (c.1162-1227) in the history books is an interesting one. For Europeans he was a bloodthirsty barbarian but for Mongols he is an exemplary man who is crucial part of the Mongolian identity.¹⁷ He is thought to have established the first Mongolian state and he is the founding father of the Mongolian state and people, he is and has everything that is unique about Mongolia and Mongolians. (Wallace 2015b, 70-73)

Multiple shrines have been built in the name of Chinggis Khaan in the decades and centuries after his death, and his deification probably started after the reign (1229-1241) of Ögdei Khaan. First he was not directly connected with Buddhist deities (as there is no mention of this in the “Secret History of Mongols” written in the 13th century) in Mongolian documents, but already in early Mongolian documents of 14th century mention him as an incarnated Buddhist guardian deity. (Erdenebaatar 2008, 19-22) Although the links to Buddhism started early the real Buddhization of Chinggis Khaan’s image was done in the 16th and 17th centuries (Charleux 2008, 215).

The integration of Chinggis Khaan into Buddhism continued through the pre- and post-socialist Mongolia. He has been (and is) seen for example as an exemplary man who was the son of Indra, the lord of gods, as a creator of a Buddhist dharmic state. As a man who forced an ending to the wars and suffering created by other religions and so gave everyone under his rule a chance to prosper. In this

¹⁷ While speaking of universal Mongolian identity it must be noted that prior to socialism the Mongolian identity was tied to localities and tribal or ethnic groups. The only larger uniting idea was Chinggis Khan and the sentiment that he is some sort of ancestral figure. Even with prior linguistic and cultural similarities the idea of an Mongolian national identity was constructed during 20th century under socialism. (Kaplonski 1998)

kind of interpretations the socially and religiously powerful image of Chinggis Khaan is linked profoundly into Buddhism. (Wallace 2015b, 71-73)

The image of Chinggis Khaan is also still alive and well among the shamanic tradition. In 2002, on the 840th birthday of Chinggis Khaan, the Prime Minister of Mongolia, Enkhbayar, made a speech where he said that the Khaan practiced shamanism his whole life, and youth should be proud of him as an ancestor. At the end of his speech Enkhbayar told people to take note on the Khaan's deeds and life, and also to take power and energy from Chinggis Khaan's Mongolia, and doing so they would succeed in their efforts. (Merli 2004, 119) Apart from politicians also shamans hold a great emphasis on Chinggis Khaan. For example the shaman Zorigtbaatar (who was an important figure in the contemporary Mongolian shamanism) told people to keep the essence of Chinggis in their minds and ask "what would Chinggis do in this situation?" before making a decision. (Balogh 2010, 237)

The worship of Chinggis Khaan, which was banned during the socialist era, is now playing a role in the reconstruction of the Mongolian state (Merli 2004, 120). In contemporary Mongolia everything (including politics and religion) that needs authentication to be genuinely Mongolian (and so acceptable and powerful) is linked one way or other to the Great Khaan. (Wallace 2015b, 72)

The common people in Mongolia do not make clear distinctions between Buddhism and shamanism. This includes the role of Chinggis, which might remain ambiguous. The beliefs relating to the great Khaan are clear example of the fusions that describe the Mongolian religious culture. The cult of Chinggis Khaan is more than just a belief in an ancestral spirit and it has become a sort of national faith. (Erdenebaatar 2008, 25)

3.3 Mongolian wrestling

In this chapter I will introduce the basic information and the history of Mongolian wrestling (Bukh). It is important to note that Mongolian wrestling is a blanket term used for many different wrestling sports practiced by Mongolians in Inner and Outer Mongolia. Some researchers mix these sports together, but I will focus

on Khalka Bukh that is the most widespread wrestling sport in (Outer) Mongolia, thus leaving completely out the similar sports that are widely practiced in China's Inner Mongolia and other places. When I use the term Mongolian wrestling I refer to the Khalka Bukh or some ancient (and extinct) sport/martial art that is the common ancestor of all of these sports.

Mongolian wrestling is the national sport of Mongolia. It is one of the “three manly sports”, of which the two others are archery and riding. Even though they are tagged as “manly sports” women can compete in archery and riding, but not in Mongolian wrestling. Of these three Mongolian wrestling is the most popular and it is a major attraction in Naadam. (Finer 2002, 52; Tomikawa 2006, 103; Schofield & Thompson 2007, 332; Chang 2009, 1.) It could also be described as a part of the Mongolian national identity (Rosenberg 1998, 170.).

The rules in Mongolian wrestling are quite simple, the man who touches the ground first with any other part of his body than the bottoms of his feet or palms of his hands has lost the match. There are no weight or age classes (except in some tournaments just for kids, as I observed in the National Naadam in 2017) and no time limits. The matches are fought in elimination tournaments (where the loser always drops out and the winner continues), that have an even number of participants. Usually the more experienced wrestlers may choose their opponents from third round forward and in the first rounds they are paired with inexperienced wrestlers. Prohibited techniques include punches, strangleholds and joint locks. (Chang 2009, 11-14; Krist 2014, 429) On top of that the grabbing of the face is also prohibited according to Trainer who I interviewed. Chang (2009, 11-14) also claims that grabbing the leg as prohibited technique, but this is not the case as I've observed many matches where wrestlers grabbed their opponents' legs, and according to Trainer you can grab the legs. Chang (2009) might just have confused the Inner and Outer Mongolian sports.

In Mongolian wrestling all the athletes wear an outfit that has four parts: leather boots, jacket, short briefs and hat. The jacket (*jodag*) is short and it covers the upper back and the arms of the wrestlers. It is open on the front and is tightened up with a rope over the belly. The briefs are decorated and made to fit tightly. The boots are specially made for wrestling and are also decorated and often reinforced.

The hat has a topknot and four sides and the rank (and wins) of the wrestler can be seen on the hat. If the wrestler has a national or regional rank (so he has won enough matches in certain competitions) there are small pictures in his hat that represent this rank. (Chang 2009, 7) The hat is the only part of the wrestling outfit that is not worn during a match, the wrestlers give it to their seconds before the match so that the hat would not touch the ground. Some wrestlers have in their hats long silken ribbons that have stripes in them, which indicate a certain number of wins in competitions. The jacket and the briefs are usually blue or red, but my interviews told me that there are some wrestlers that also have green outfits, even though I did not see any.

The ranking system of Mongolian wrestling is tied to the number of wins a wrestler has in different tournaments. To have a national rank the wrestlers need to have wins in the national Naadam that has at least 512 participants. With 5 straight wins you get the rank of nachin (falcon), winning 6 you become Khartsga (hawk), with 7 Zaan (elephant), 8 Garid (a mythical bird) and beating 9 opponents (and so winning the tournament) you become Arslan (lion). Additionally if you win the whole tournament at least twice you get the ranking of Avgara (giant/great). (Tomikawa 2006, 104) There are ranks also for those who have won more than twice, but these rankings are extremely rare. There are also smaller (aimag and sum level) ranking regional competitions (Naadams) that have slightly different ranks that wrestlers can acquire by winning matches. These were the more common ranks among my interviewees as the national ranks are very hard to achieve.

The most important wrestling events (and sporting events in Mongolia) are the Naadam festivals that are held across the country in July, with the biggest and most important in Ulaanbaatar. In these events there are different sporting events (especially the three competitions for men) and wrestling seems to attract the biggest crowds. (Jonathan 2002, 52; Tomikawa 2006, 107; Schofield & Thompson 2007, 332) During the 2017 national Naadam in Ulaanbaatar the most popular event was the opening ceremony followed by the first round of wrestling (according to my observations). After the first round the arena was not that full as people could watch the games/tournament at home on television, instead of sitting in the burning sun of Mongolian summer. There are also some other important

events that have wrestling matches, like the Buddhist Ovoo -festivals¹⁸ and other religious and secular events around the year according to my interviews.

A typical wrestling match looks something like this: The wrestlers enter the arena, give their hats to their seconds and perform the Eagle dance before facing each other. After the dance they start to fight for grips and the one who gets better ones tries to throw the other competitor. The throw can happen quite fast, but sometimes it takes a while for a wrestler to get the upper hand. After the throw the loser goes under the winners arm and the winner does the Eagle dance.

3.3 Historical connections of Mongolian wrestling and religion

In this chapter I will give a short analysis of how religion has been part of Mongolian wrestling since times immemorial. There is not much information about this subject in English and my own material does not include data about historical roots in detail. Thus I will mainly combine previous research into a presentation of the connection of Mongolian wrestling and religion in a historical context. It is not possible to differentiate different styles of Mongolian wrestling in ancient (and pre-modern) history, so when I use the word Mongolian wrestling in this chapter I discuss a somewhat unified wrestling tradition among the Mongolian people. This is in contrast to other chapters where the different styles are differentiated.

First traces of connection between wrestling and religion in the area where Mongols originate, can be traced near lake Baikal, which is close to the modern state of Mongolia. There have been petroglyphs found that are thousands of years old that depict wrestling humans, but some of these wrestlers have anthropomorphic features, for example horns, trunks and bird like heads. It is almost certain that these Neolithic pictures are depicting some kind of ritualised or symbolic wrestling matches where totemic animals (or possibly good and evil) fight each other according to the regions shamanistic tradition. In these kinds of Central Asian shamanistic bouts pairs of people (one usually being a shaman) impersonate mythical or real animals that are dangerous and thus symbolize evil.

¹⁸ See Tomikawa 2006, 105-107 for more.

These pictures also include hawks and/or eagles, animals that have been and still are deeply connected to Mongolian wrestling through the Eagle dance and ranking system. Though the connection of these animals and wrestling was probably something different than what it is today. The archaeological evidence about wrestling also encompasses some of the so-called Ordos Bronze plates, girdle or belt plates that are dated from the fourth to first century BCE, that can be found in the eastern part of Eurasian steppe. (Krist 2014, 425-426.)

Some of the first written descriptions of Mongolian wrestling can be found in the Mongolian heroic epos Geser (that is thought to be over 1000 years old) and other folk literature. Quite often wrestling is described in these stories to be mythical bouts between a representation of good and evil. (Krist 2014, 426.)

The first historiographic sources from Mongolian wrestling can be found in the Chronicles of the Khitan Liao dynasty (c. 907-1125 CE) that ruled over a huge empire including Manchuria and northern China. These chronicles include stories about professional wrestlers who fought in different kinds of ceremonies, like weddings and shamanistic (and imperial) rain rituals. (Krist 2014, 426.)

From these examples Krist (2014, 426) deduces that wrestling has always been part of religious celebration in Inner Asia. Wrestling was not turned into some sort of cultic ritual, but it was (and still is) an integral part of rituals as wrestling can be thought of being acts of magic¹⁹ during the rituals. The premises for this idea can be found in Neolithic rock carvings, ancient bronze plates, legendary tales of wrestling in folk literature, Khitan imperial rituals and in the countless stories that ethnographers have collected.

Conversion to Buddhism (c. 1500-1800) did not change the role that wrestlers had in Mongolian society, the wrestlers remained mediators between Mongolians and the divine. Buddhist monks did ban some shamanistic practices, like sacrificing

¹⁹ Defining magic is not easy as it has been used in many ways from trying to explain behaviour to accusations of false religion. Like many others, when I write about magic I mean behaviour where humans try to control supernatural forces. Also I primarily discuss sympathetic magic which is thinking (and acting) where “like affects like”. So by imitating something you will get power from it or affect the world around you. For example imitating a horse one might get the power of the horse or by sticking a needle into a voodoo dolls arm it will cause pain on the person the doll is imitating. (Davies 2012, 1-13, 82-83.)

living horses but this did not affect wrestling in any meaningful manner. Just as before, religious ceremonies (this time Buddhist) were followed by events where men would compete in the three manly sports (wrestling being one of them). In addition the Buddhist clergy organized wrestling events in the context of originally Buddhist ceremonies, as during consecration of new stupas and the annual tribute to the *Bogdo-Gegen* (Head of Mongolian Buddhist clergy, a “living buddha”). Buddhist monasteries also had their own wrestlers, usually successful ones, that could train full time because of the economic support from the monasteries. (Krist 2014, 428.)

The historical conversion to Buddhism can also be interpreted to have increased the power of the wrestlers. While doing the Eagle dance, they no longer were just imitating eagles, but the mythical Buddhist super-strong king of the birds, Garuda. Nothing in the Eagle dances appearance changed, but the mythical shamanistic context was replaced by a Buddhist one. (Krist 2014, 428.)

After the communists took power (before the founding of Mongolian People's Republic), wrestling had still a significant role in Mongolian culture. In the early years of communism Buddhism and religious rituals led by monks were still prominent at different games (or events where wrestling took place). This was soon to be changed and new ideological content filled the events. For example the introduction songs that were sung to winning wrestlers had had some religious parts, but during the socialist regime the songs were changed to praise the People's Republic of Mongolia. In short, the socialist regime brought secularization and politicization to the wrestling events. Still wrestling remained a very popular sport among the Mongols. (Krist 2014, 431-433.) This kind of development was also very common in Soviet Republics. The leading party tried to infiltrate every sphere of life, to destroy the old cultural forms and to replace them or transform them (like in this case) into new ones that supported the leading ideology and policy. One key point in this development was secularization of all traditional wrestling sports that were to be promoted in the new socialist states. Wrestling should be connected and associated with socialist festivities, not religious ones. (Petrov 2014, 407)

After the fall of socialism in the early 1990s all sporting activities generally declined because of the dire economic conditions. However during this time there begun an effort to bring the sport back into its roots by revitalizing customs, traditions and rituals that were missing during socialism. A time for re-traditionalization had begun. (Krist 2014, 432-434.) The Bukh Federation (Mongolian wrestling federation in Mongolia), formed in 1990, took a lead in this progress of reviving Mongolian wrestling. They took a stance where Mongolian wrestling was seen as an ancient sport that preserved a form of Mongolian essence, and it was their mission to bring this sport into the modern era. (Tomikawa 2004, 19)

There was a similar process across all former Soviet states, where the sambofication²⁰ had made all the traditional styles quite similar and secular. Different kinds of manuals, booklets, presentations, interviews and other sources were used in an uncritical way in the process to make the sports more traditional. Mythical links to the past were created and links to national heroes were established. The new re-traditionalized styles had for example different kinds of shamanistic dances and ranking systems (for example among Buryats similar titles as in Mongolian wrestling were adopted) that were nowhere to be seen during soviet era. (Petrov 2014, 412.)

In the case of Mongolian wrestling retraditionalization is a good term to describe the current process. The new customs were in new forms that had not existed before socialism. In short the communist symbols were replaced by the new symbols of the state cults, like in other spheres of society. This can be seen during the Naadam celebration where the new (or the new form of the) cult of Chinggis Khaan is in the center of the event. Cavalrymen, wearing traditionalized outfits, carry his standards to the center of the field and guard it during the whole event where wrestlers do the Eagle dance around the standards. (Krist 2014, 434.) The process also started extremely quick, even before the official fall of socialism, as the standards were already part of the Naadam in summer of 1990 (same year that Mongolia had the first multiparty elections in the autumn), although this came as

²⁰ In this context sambofication means the sportification of traditional wrestling sports in soviet states. Sports are made more like contemporary Olympic sports, introducing point systems, time limits, weight classes and so on. The word itself refers to the Russian sport of Sambo that is close to 20th century Judo. See petrov (2014) for more discussion.

surprise to the viewers (Sanders 1991, 161.). This kind of new-old identity process through wrestling has also been encouraged internationally by UNESCO and other regional and global operators with their cultural heritage policies and the way Mongolian wrestling is shaping out is just a part of a larger trend. (Bromer et al. 2014, 399-300.)²¹

This process was clearly visible during the 2017 Naadam games where a mythical past of Mongolia was presented. The opening ceremony was basically a mythical show that went through the whole Mongolian history. Massive Buddhist deities and demons were everywhere and different animals (like a huge eagle) were dancing around the stadium. The show went through the whole Mongolian history from creation to present day. A great emphasis was of course on the part where Genghis Khaan was present, played by a Mongolian celebrity. Highlight of the show was the carrying and planting of the nine standards of Genghis Khaan. The wrestlers also prayed on the altar where the standards were placed, and thus participated in the cult. (Field Journal, 11th and 12th of June 2017)

As a conclusion it can be said that Mongolian wrestling has its roots in religious activities. The connection between religion, magic and wrestling has been strong during much of the known past and the change in dominant religious views (from shamanism to Buddhism) did not really change much. This link was partially destroyed during the socialist era when the sport was secularized and sambofied, just like other traditional wrestling²² sports in Central Asia. After socialism the link with religion has been made mainly through retraditionalization, where old customs have been reinterpreted and new customs created.

²¹ This is not affecting just Central Asian or to former socialist nations, but others as well. For example a Turkish oil wrestling event was elevated to status of 'Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity' by UNESCO. (Krawietz 2012, 2155)

²² Defining traditional wrestling is not easy, but basically it can be seen as conserving some kind of important tradition (old or [re]invented) that is important locally. These styles of wrestling have some permanent and distinctive features, that are deemed important ideologically and historically. One way to examine traditional wrestling is to look them in contrast to international wrestling styles like Sambo, Judo or Greco-Roman wrestling and this might be the easiest way to distinct them from other styles of wrestling. Still this does not mean that traditional sports are not wrestled internationally, but the international audience can be small. (Philippe 2014)

4. Analysis

In this chapter I will introduce the findings of my study. There is also discussion about previous literature and I attach my findings into the existing field of Mongolian (wrestling) studies, sometimes backing previous research and sometimes contradicting or challenging it. The material is introduced in a manner that follows an imaginary timeline of a wrestler, so I start with categories that affect a wrestler before he has been born and end in a category that takes place after a wrestling event.

4.1 Born to wrestle: bloodlines and stars

One of my main goals during the field trip was to find the answers to the questions: What makes a great wrestler and how does one become such? Can you be born as a great wrestler or is there something special that has to be done? To answer this theme Trainer told me that: “Born a wrestler has a similar chance to a grain falling on a needle.“. So it seems that some (few) people are destined for greatness and most are not.

In Mongolia bloodlines are thought to be an integral part of deciding what kind of wrestler one will be. Having good wrestlers in a family makes it more likely that the next generation will also have good wrestlers. During the interview with Second Lama he said: “In Mongolia, the bloodline is very important, especially if the mother[‘s] and father’s side have wrestler, it also depends from the bloodline.” and to my follow up question of “So, if you have lots of wrestlers in your family you will probably become a good wrestler.” he replied positively.

The bloodlines are not just about genetics and great training partners but something completely else, that makes them more powerful than other wrestlers. This connection by kinship gives extra chance to be born as a powerful wrestler.

Shaman: Yes, the ability of wrestler will be rendered from generation to generation. That kind of wrestlers are more powerful than others. There is also wrestlers who was born with power that was not rendered from their generation. If there is a wrestler in mother’s side, those wrestlers are more powerful than others.

There is also a possible distinction between relating to wrestlers on mother’s side and on father’s side as Shaman told that kinship through mother’s side is more important, but other interviewees did not make this kind of differentiation.

The idea of bloodlines was used in a broader meaning by Wrestler. He had himself several wrestlers in his family, but he insisted that all Mongolians, not only those with great wrestling lineages, were born to wrestle. The significant difference between wrestlers was training, not bloodlines.

Wrestler: Ahn, that is well now, I think all Mongolians are wrestler-borns. Right now who practices more and educates more has a potential to wrestle better.

This statement seems to reflect the idea that wrestling is an integral part of Mongolian identity (Rosenberg 1998, 42). It seems that the best bloodline for generating great Mongolian wrestlers, in Wrestler's opinion, is a Mongolian one.

Other than having good bloodline also the time and place of birth might affect the future wrestlers' ability to wrestle. Second lama acknowledged that time and date of birth in relation to the Buddhist calendar might affect your aura and so affect your ability to wrestle. Interestingly Shaman also mentions that the date of birth is a significant factor in becoming a successful wrestler.

It seems that according to my interviewees some people are just born as wrestlers as others are not. There was no clear answer on how to track these people, but kinship (bloodline) with great wrestlers and date of birth seemed to affect the chances of this happening. Interestingly the experts, from both of the religious traditions that I interviewed, had quite similar answers and they agreed on most of the points. This might reflect the mixing of Buddhist and shamanistic beliefs discussed earlier in chapter three.

4.2 Buddhist philosophy: karma, ethics and the philosophy of mind

The Buddhist notion of karma was mentioned multiple times during my interviews. It was deemed important to have good karma to be a successful wrestler and the wrestler could influence his karma by his actions. Also the actions that he (or his ancestors) had taken in past lives affected his ability to wrestle in this life. Both lamas also associated the Buddhist philosophy of mind and ethics with questions about karma so I include this discussion into this chapter.

Prior good karma from previous lives was seen as a prerequisite quality that can make or break a wrestler according to the lamas. Second Lama elaborated this with a story of a wrestler who killed a wolf skinning it alive, after it had killed his horse, and obtained bad karma from this deed. His actions (and so karma) led to the downfall of the next generation of his family as there were no wrestlers in it.

The First Lama stated in a really strict manner that it was an obvious prerequisite for a successful wrestler to have good karma in previous lives. His answer to my question about the effects of karma (from previous lives) was clear:

First Lama: Of course [karma from previous lives affects you]. That is why they [wrestlers] are strong and tall. If you are stronger and taller you will succeed more.

Wrestling could also be seen as a way to achieve karma or to lose karma, which then would affect your wrestling performance in this life and in the next. Losing karma during wrestling matches should be easy as breaking the rules and cheating would be a definite way for losing karma. Also a very competitive mindset and thinking might affect your karma according to Second Lama.

Second Lama: Every athlete, when they see the opponent, their thoughts are 'I have to win' or 'I have to knock him down' or something. Their thoughts are very tight and also based on the very wrong way - It might be bad karma

Obtaining good karma by wrestling might be a little trickier. This is due to the "competitors' mindset" mentioned before. Second Lama also thought that this kind of thinking is integral to humans ("hatred, illusion and greedy thoughts") and are essential to sports.

Second Lama: And that grudge or arrogance whatever it is has to come up to wrestle.

On the other hand First Lama did acknowledge that wrestling right could "definitely" bring karma. He also linked the gaining of karma with the support from the audience.

First Lama: During the wrestling, if you are honest and people support you in a good way, it should be [bring] karma.

The interviewees did not discuss or elaborate widely on the concept of karma. Unsurprisingly the lamas talked about it more, but others did not know much about it or did not think it had an impact. Trainer however thought there is some truth in karma from past lives affecting your ability to wrestle.

The Buddhist notion of controlling your mind and being ethical was also discussed when I asked both lamas questions about the connection of Buddhism and Mongolian wrestling. I interpreted it as religious ability/quality as it was directly connected to Buddhism.

Both lamas described the connection between Mongolian wrestling and Buddhism as mainly a mental one. If you want to succeed (and reach your goal) in wrestling, or life in general, the mind should be prepared and tamed. In the words of First Lama: “It is important to train their [wrestlers] minds”.

First Lama gives a six-step guide on how (or what qualities of mind you need) to reach professional wisdom that is needed for reaching a goal. These include being ethical, helpful, patient, diligent, concentrated on your goal and educated about your goal. By following these steps you will reach any goal (including being a successful wrestler) and also all successful people have been following these steps. Through these it is also possible to reach enlightenment.

First Lama: I think people too [not just monks] must have these six principles to [reach] a goal. Yes, this is the main thing. Buddhist method and way of reaching the enlightenment. [for] You too, it is same as you learn English, and how you educate yourself, follow these six principles.

Being ethical also means that a wrestler needs to be fair and honest. He should follow the trainer’s instructions and avoid prohibited behaviour like partying (including drinking alcohol) and follow the principles. There will be difficulties and that you can triumph over these by following the ethical way of being.

First Lama also added that wrestling alone will not make you a successful wrestler. To reach true success the sportsman must be friendly and helpful to others, diligent in his actions and prepared. Second Lama added mercy to the list as he had heard stories about it (but did not elaborate on them). So it seems there

is much more in becoming a successful wrestler than just wrestling, according to the lamas.

Second Lama continued on the idea of controlling your mind, and he stated that the three natural and negative qualities of the mind (as mentioned before in this chapter) “hatred, illusion and greedy thoughts” must be controlled according to the teaching of Buddhism. Controlling and recognizing these thoughts is beneficial for wrestlers and they should tame their minds so they can achieve this. There also used to be wrestling monks (as in monks that wrestle) who used to teach taming of the mind to other wrestlers.

Second Lama: natural [human] behaviour is based on the three things, one is hatred, illusion and greedy, greedy thoughts. Usually humans’ life is just following and lead by these three things. So try to calm it down. Before and after recognising those thoughts is good to the wrestlers.

At first glance it seems Second Lama’s interview provided some contradicting information about controlling the mind and wrestling. He does state that there are negative qualities that must be tamed, controlled and recognized, but on the other hand some of these must be present while wrestling. This might seem as a paradox as a wrestler should control and tame his feelings and at the same time these feelings are necessary for wrestling, one must control or push away feelings that he must have to succeed.

On the other hand in the interview there seems to be an idea of necessity, something that cannot be avoided, which should then be recognized and controlled (or tamed) in a Buddhist way. The taming or controlling does not necessarily mean that these feelings are pushed to the side, but some other kind of relationship where the feelings are still there and one can affect these and the outcomes that these feelings have as “calming down” does not mean removing. This kind of interpretation avoids the contradiction and the paradox, but it is not an inevitable way of interpreting as the interview might just be little contradictory.

The notion of karma in the context of Mongolian wrestling did not seem to be an important question (or essential part of Buddhist creed) to my interviewees. The lamas elaborated on the subject, but in a way wrestling was just one sport (or activity) in the field of different ways of gaining, losing and using karma. There

was nothing special in wrestling, but this was expected as both lamas stated that they are not experts (or knowledgeable) about wrestling, and most of the other interviewees did not talk about karma.

Wrestling among Mongolian peoples has in prior research been linked to enlightenment and Buddhist philosophy. The leader of the Buddhist clergy in Buryatia, Khambo Lama Ayusheyev, has said that Buryat wrestling ‘is a key to possible comprehensions of the deepest secrets of Buddha’s teaching – to find the Middle Way’. (Krist 2014, 435-435) The lamas I interviewed did not give as strong statements, but there was clear connection between the methods one needs to use to become an enlightened person and a successful wrestler. There have been very successful Buryats who have wrestled in Mongolian wrestling in Mongolia (not just in Buryatia where similar wrestling is also a popular sport [Hamayon 1998, 59]) (Lincoln 1997, 90). It would be interesting to research if the statements made by the leading Buryatian Buddhist leader impact ethnic Buryat wrestlers’ thoughts, in contrast to my interviewees who did not have such grand ideas linking wrestling and Buddhism.

Combining Buddhist philosophy and wrestling seemed to be easy for the lamas, but there was no greater meaning involved, wrestling was just a part of activities that you can enhance through Buddhism. The qualities of mind that you need to success in life (and to live an ethical life) are the same qualities that a wrestler needs to succeed. Karma is an integral part of all human life, and so Mongolian wrestling is connected to it. A wrestler can acquire good or bad karma through wrestling and he needs it to become a successful wrestler.

The lamas also gave an interesting view to the history of wrestling. Krist (2014, 435.) states that Buddhism did not fully get its connection back with Mongolian wrestling, which could be seen with my interviews. Both lamas had similar views and for example stated that the Naadam has nothing to do with Buddhism (even though it used to). They seemed to associate it more with Mongolian folk religion. Still there was some kind of revival of the connection between Buddhism and Wrestling as First and Second Lama both said that many contemporary Monks wrestle (even telling a story about the very greatest and most successful Mongolian wrestler, wanting to become a monk). Wrestling is also present during

different Buddhist festivals and ceremonies (like Tsam- and Ovoo festivals). This kind of link between religion and wrestling, that was severed, is something that could be considered a true (not just invented or retraditionalized) step back into the time before socialism as ethnographies from early 1900s imply this kind of relation of Buddhism and Wrestling. For example Gull (1914, 10-11) describes how a wrestling event is held (and spectated by the Buddhist clergy) after a Tsam festival in the area that is current day Ulaanbaatar.²³

Other interviewees also discussed ethical behaviour and controlling the mind in a similar manner as the lamas. It is noteworthy as Wrestler gives a statement that Mongolian wrestling gives you a “right attitude”, Shaman says that without self-control a man cannot succeed in Mongolian wrestling and Trainer says that the wrestlers must train their minds.²⁴

In the history of Mongolian religions the impact of Buddhism is quite clear. The statements of the other interviewees clearly are connected to Buddhist thinking, even though they are not as complex as those given by the lamas. It seems that everyone I interviewed has the idea that there are distinct qualities of the mind (like self-control) that must be present in a wrestler if he wishes to be successful. Also the idea of being ethically correct in a similar manner as described by the lamas was quite clearly emphasized by Trainer and Wrestler who went so far to say that wrestlers must do good things and charity to others and refrain from doing any bad things at all.

As a conclusion it can be said that it is clear that Buddhist thinking can be linked to Mongolian wrestling and Buddhism has shaped the way people think about wrestling and wrestlers. Important aspects were karma, right kind of state of mind and right kind of ethical being. The Buddhist influence was apparent in all of the interviews, but this was not surprising when thinking about the history of Mongolia.

²³ I was also invited to wrestle in Ovoo festivals in the case I would go back to Mongolia.

²⁴ There are social norms of good conduct in rural Mongolia regarding hospitality. For example hospitality without expectations of returning the favour is an important ethical virtue. Breaking these rules relating this kind of good conduct is thought to bring bad luck. (O’Gorman & Thompson 2007, 20; Humphrey 2012, S63, S66) Interestingly my interviewees did not speak about hospitality at all (while speaking about right kind of conduct), even though they probably were aware of these ethical norms.

4.3 Hiimori: acquiring luck and fortune

Fortune and vitality in Mongolia are not just something you receive by some sort of divine game of chance, but something you can acquire. This fortune is called Hiimori and it is something that decides if you will be successful on some endeavour or not. Wrestlers have hiimori, and they seem to embody this force. Hiimori is something you must have to be successful in this world and so everyone who has succeeded in life, has it. External signs like wealth, winning a wrestling match or healthy children can be used to determine who has hiimori. (Da Col & Humphrey 2012, 4; Humphrey & Ujeed 2012, 152, 155, 160.)²⁵

Trainer: If you achieved your goal, you have khiimori.... You don't need to understand that khiimori can be increased only by wrestling in a Mongolian wrestling. We have a champion in a judo wrestling because he has good khiimori. Every person has a khiimori.²⁶

Hiimori was a central topic in all of the interviews except with the lamas. The interviewees deemed it a significant factor in determining who is a great wrestler, even though they had problems explaining the meaning of it to a foreigner. The concept of fortune was however linked with hiimori on multiple occasions in a similar manner as Humphrey & Ujeed (2012) explain it.

Trainer: There is not any explanation of khiimori. I think the khiimori is in hard work and fortune. If he works hard, his khiimori will be increased

Hiimori is closely related with a concept called *sülde* that could also be thought as fortune and is thought by some to be synonymous to hiimori (Humphrey & Ujeed 2012, 152-155; Pedersen 2012, 138). I leave *sülde* out of this analysis as only Shaman was able to differentiate the two in a manner that would allow analysing

²⁵ I realize that hiimori could be compared to *mana* or *väki*, but as this is out of the scope of my study I have deemed it unnecessary, as the concept of hiimori can be understood without these comparisons. Also as this work is based on field material collected in Mongolia I prefer using Mongolian terms whenever possible, even though some readers might be more accustomed to ideas of *mana* or *väki*. I also feel that these kinds of unnecessary comparisons are part of scientific imperialism where ideas that are common in the West are forcefully used in places where one could use native terms, which might have slightly different meaning. There is no place or need for imperialism when I am researching, and using material from, Mongolian ideas and Mongolian people. See Da Col (2012) for more about *mana*, Mongolian concepts of luck and categorization.

²⁶ The term *khiimori* is used in some of the translations as the original Mongolian word *хийморь* can be translated that way (as it is common to translate the letter *x* to *kh*). Other authors writing in English use mainly the word *hiimori* (which is close to how it is pronounced) so I use it as well. On some transcriptions (and translations) the same word *хийморь* is translated into the word *spirit* (as *hiimori* could be thought to be a person's spirit) and I use brackets [*hiimori*] after these cases so the text is easier to follow.

them. Trainer thought that hiimori and sülde were different sides of same coin so in a way discussing about one would also be discussing the other.

Even though one can see from the external signs if someone has hiimori, you can never know if he or she has enough for a particular endeavour. This leads to a situation where people must use different kinds of methods to make sure they have enough for some single task. For example one can use divination (rituals that give you more hiimori) or some other method (usually related to winning something “chancy” like gambling, wrestling or hunting) to make sure you have enough hiimori for tomorrow, so you won’t fail at your task. (Humphrey & Ujeed 2012, 155-156)

Shaman: The spirit [hiimori] depends on how to relate to nature. If his spirit [hiimori] is good, he feels happiness and succeeds for [in] everything. If someone does not feel well, he or she should go to his/her motherland. Then he/ she has to burn incense by juniper. After this, he/she feels better. I think, the sky, earth and spirit [hiimori] are connected with each other.

This kind of behaviour is prevalent among wrestlers who need to have lots of hiimori to win and they do everything they can to maximize their hiimori. Different kinds of divinations, training in auspicious places and so on seems to be necessary for wrestlers if they want to succeed.

These divinations were discussed shortly by most of the interviewees. Praying to different entities was deemed to be a good source for getting hiimori, and for example Trainer thought that praying to the sun and the blue sky was important. On the other hand (and as an interesting note) the praying itself was deemed beneficial by Shaman, not praying to a particular god, spirit or entity.

Shaman: For wrestlers, they wake up early in the morning before wrestling. They will pray according to their religion. There are few people who pray. They pray for their parents, earth and gods. After increasing his spirit [hiimori], he can wrestle well.

Trainer also makes it very clear that hiimori can be acquired from some auspicious places. For example the ovoos, a heap of stones that serves as a shrine for Mongolians, can give hiimori to a wrestler. Training at a top of a mountain also helps (interestingly ovoos are quite often in high places, like on top of mountains according my interpreter). Trainer also added that hiking up to a mountain in person’s birthplace and praying towards the sun was very beneficial

for acquiring hiimori. Gaining hiimori from your place of birth (and rolling around there) is also noted by Humphrey & Ujeed (2012, 160-161) and it seems to be a widely known traditional belief. From the interviews with Trainer it can be concluded that the auspicious places can be stacked for maximum efficiency. A top of a mountain is good, having an ovoo on top of that mountain is better and if it happens to be your place of birth, you are quite well off.

Chinggis Khaan also had a place in the hierarchy of training places. As I entered the training camp and spoke with Trainer he straight away mentioned that the site of the camp was the wintering place of Chinggis Khaan and so it had special symbolism. From this I concluded that this is not just an historical fact, but also an attribute that makes the place a better site for a training camp. Shaman elaborated on this idea and explained the proper meaning of it by telling that it would give power and energy to wrestlers, as the power of the Great Khaan would still be there (even though he seemed little unsure about it as he had not heard of the place before).

Shaman: I don't know anything about that place. If it is true, the energy of Chingis Khan and his wrestlers will be there. If wrestlers believes truly and refill their energy they can take power from the place.

Both Trainer and Wrestler emphasised that hard work is the most important thing for acquiring hiimori. Trainer emphasised this on multiple occasions, but Shaman did not make a such clear connection between hiimori and hard work, even though he said that hard training is the most important thing if a wrestler is to succeed.

Trainer: Winning depends on how much khiimori you have. How hard you work creates how much khiimori you have.

Trainer, Wrestler and Shaman connected proper behaviour with hiimori. They all stated that proper conduct can reinforce hiimori gain or when improper make it go away. This idea of proper conduct was quite similar to the (Buddhist) ethics described by the lamas. Especially Wrestler was very adamant that good behaviour (including charitable deeds and so on) would give you more hiimori, wrestling itself could be a good deed in his opinion.

Wrestler: Generally, now everything has to have a spirit, and most importantly oneself must work hard, must practice well. Aahn, on top of the characters, must not do bad things at all.

Must do the goodness/charity to another person, otherwise must not do the sin. If so the khiimori will wane, yes relevant.

Interestingly Trainer thought that taking steroids (and so being a cheater) will not decrease hiimori (as they are “used internationally”), even though he strictly condemned this kind of behaviour and thought it to be very dangerous. Wrestler stated that Mongolian wrestlers do not use alcohol or tobacco (I did however see wrestlers using tobacco in different forms in the camp during their preparation for the Naadam) and this was a factor in their high hiimori. This might be kind of contradictory as Wrestlers thinks that by not using weaker drugs hiimori rises, but Trainer feels that using much stronger substances do not have an effect on hiimori.

Wrestler: Doing the wrestling is a good thing, how to say the bad thing though, we spend our free time for good stuff. Mongolian wrestlers do not consume the alcohol and tobacco. Yes, so it means the khiimori will be upright. Because of doing good deeds.

Training with right people was seen as a way to get more hiimori. It is not surprising that training with successful (and so those who have a lot of hiimori) wrestlers rises the chances of winning, and Trainer linked hiimori to this process. Trainer made a statement that “Khiimori, preparation, training and talent. Winning requires all of it.”. So it is not just about getting good training partners and good technique, it is also about hiimori.

This kind of thinking seems to be similar to the idea that people can combine their hiimori into a single pool that allows them to succeed (Pedersen 2012, 138). On the other hand hiimori is generally thought to be personal and individual (Empson 2012, 118) so the mechanism behind this kind of acquisition of hiimori might be related closer to the belief that hiimori (and luck) can be transferred through direct physical contact with a successful wrestler (or a person/item who has hiimori) or through touching his sweat. (Tomikawa 2006, 105; Humphrey & Ujeed 2012, 160) The latter kind of thought was clearly visible in my interviews as everyone except First Lama acknowledged that there are these kinds of beliefs in Mongolia, though Second Lama did say that it is not a Buddhist belief.

Trainer: Yes, that is a real luck if you touch him [a winning wrestler] and get fortune from him. You are getting a good energy from him.

Interestingly getting close to these hiimori rich people might require hiimori. As hiimori can be seen by success in different (especially chanchy) tasks (Humphrey & Ujeed 2012, 155). My task was to talk to people who were obviously rich in hiimori (successful wrestlers) so I myself needed hiimori to even get to contact with them.

Trainer: I will explain you by example. You are making friends with me [...] in order to know about Mongolian wrestlers. You have khiimori to be my friends.

From this idea it could be derived that also the younger wrestlers who wish to train with the greats (and so acquire hiimori), must have hiimori to begin with. I never managed to interview the highest-ranking wrestler in the camp, a state nanchin (ranked 8-16 in the country). So it just might be that my hiimori was not high enough for that endeavour.

Though I have argued that hiimori is a way towards successful wrestling match or career, it is not alone enough to succeed. Like previously mentioned hard work, training, karma, control of the mind and other things are necessities, no man is a winner with just hiimori. Shaman explained this in clear manner when asked about wrestling ability and hiimori (and sülde).

Shaman: Yes, they need spirit [hiimori] and coat of arms [sülde]. In my view, spirit [hiimori] is courage. Besides courage, he needs self-control. The self-control depends on his mind. If the wrestlers have courage, self-control and mind, he can succeed for wrestling. If he doesn't have self-control, he can't succeed even if he has good spirit [hiimori].

This statement was very close to those given by the lamas, as they also spoke about self-control (controlling the mind) and qualities of the mind. This connection is not a surprising one as Buddhism and shamanism in Mongolia have influenced each other in the past (Purev & Purvee 2012, 55-57, 61, 64; Wallace 2015a, xv-xvii).

As a conclusion hiimori seems to be a crucial element in making or breaking a wrestler. There are ways to see who has hiimori and who does not have it, and these signs were clear for the interviewees. Those who do not succeed or run into misfortune have a low hiimori (or it is "lying down"), and those who have it succeed in their endeavours (Humphrey & Ujeed 2012, 155-156). This was clearly stated by Trainer, who said: "[...] if you achieve your goals, you have

khiimori” and in a wrestling context: “Winning the tournament means you have khiimori at its highest”.

A wrestler can gain or lose hiimori by several different means, so it fluctuates. Wrestlers have to act well, pray to different entities, travel into auspicious places and train with good (hiimori rich) wrestlers. Even though it is an essential part of becoming the strongest and the most successful wrestler, it is not the only important feature. A man might have all the hiimori in the world, but without training and proper mindset he will not succeed as a wrestler.

4.4 Harming others: rituals of malice and protection

In the world of Mongolian wrestling it might not always be enough to become strong through rituals and training. Sometimes it might be necessary to bring your opponents down through magic. This is where the harming rituals, as described by Shaman, come in. He informed me that “Yes, they [wrestlers] choose lamas and Shamans requesting to put a curse on their opponent. [In order to win matches]”. But he did not go further in describing these rituals (like he had done with some others). It was not clear how common these rituals were, though my translator told me during the interview that these rituals were common (the transliterations and translations do not show the Shaman saying anything like this).

The idea of cursing someone to gain an upper hand in competition was, not that surprisingly, quite controversial. As I asked the question about these kinds of rituals from Trainer, he visibly got irritated and denied it completely. In his mind the Mongolian people were honest competitors who never used these kinds of rituals. He even called Shaman a bad (“not good”) person for telling these lies.

Trainer: I don't know anything about rite or curse. Mongolian people don't request performing rite or curse. That shaman gave you wrong information. Mongolian wrestlers compete with each other honestly. They don't have any reason to request performing rite or curse. After competition, they are still good friends. We follow our tradition strictly.

So there is a clear contradiction between the statements made by Shaman compared to those made by Trainer. Unfortunately I did not have time to interview more people about these harming rituals to see if they were well known amongst others. It was clear that Trainer had an idea of a clean, honest sport in his

mind and this image would be spoiled by including harming rituals into the world of Mongolian wrestling. It is not clear why Shaman (and the translator who was his relative) might have been lying (other than maybe making himself look more important or powerful, but this seems farfetched) and there is no other option than to acknowledge his statements. It is quite possible that the contradiction might just be about Trainer's lack of knowledge.

Even though Trainer did not believe that this kind of harming was present in Mongolian wrestling he did believe that people should ward themselves from bad energies. This could be achieved by going to monks or shamans or just praying to the nature.

Trainer: Well, that is difficult. Bad energies are everywhere and injuries are just around the corner. If they don't go to Buddhist monks or shamans, they give offerings and pray for the Mother Nature. Mongolians worship the Mother nature and the Blue sky.

Wrestler also agreed with Trainer on this as he said that warding against "bad things" was common among wrestlers. He linked it to reading (Buddhist) mantras that guard wrestlers from injuries and bad things.

Wrestler: Ahn, yes of course [we] do [perform religious rituals]. Well how to say before going out to wrestle, the wrestlers usually have own mantra. Well, that protects from bad things and injury, like it.

So it is clear that there is a need to protect yourself from harmful events (like injuries) and religious rituals are crucial in achieving this. Interestingly Wrestler points out to a predominantly Buddhist ritual (reading mantras) and Trainer gave advice that encompasses Buddhism, shamanism and Mongolian folk religion, with emphasis in the latter two. It seems that there can be clear differences between wrestlers as in what rituals they take part of and which (Mongolian) religion they participate in preparation for a wrestling match.

It can be interpreted that Trainer thinks that it is important to make sure that bad energies have no part in deciding who becomes the winner of a wrestling match. It does not matter where the energies are coming from (as they are everywhere) but one thing is for sure, other wrestlers are not doing rituals that increase these bad energies. His adamant statement that Mongolian people do not put curses on each other, is not just in odds with Shaman but also with other literature on Mongolian

Shamanism (e.g. Buyandelgeriyn 2007, 187; Balogh 2010, 231; Swancutt 2012, 127-143). It could be stated with confidence that this kind of knowledge or behaviour is not obscure among Mongolians. Still the prior literature about Mongolian Shamanism includes plenty of other reasons for misfortune than curses set by other people, like spirits that are discontent (Buyandelgeriyn 2007; Balogh 2010, 237).

As a conclusion, it can be said that there is a need for protection against bad things and energies and this protection can be gained by various religious rituals. It is also clear that a shaman can cause misfortune to others by cursing them. The real question remains: is this kind of behaviour prevalent in Mongolian wrestling? If we are to believe Shaman and the translator, it exists and might even be common, but if we are to believe Trainer, this kind of behaviour is non-existent.

4.5 Eagle dance: showing your strength and getting power from imitation

The most visible and prominent ritual in Mongolian wrestling is quite clearly the Eagle dance. The ritual is something that everyone watching Mongolian wrestling has seen as it is done before wrestling, right before the match, right after the match and sometimes even during practice. It is prominent but its meaning is still quite unclear and even a little controversial. So I present a short historical analysis about the dance and then compare prior research to my interviews.

Krist (2014, 425-427.) argues that Eagle dance is sympathetic magic, originating from ancient times. It comes from a ritualistic practice, performed by ancient and current day Mongolians, which aims to attract wealth, health and prosperity from gods and ancestors. Wrestling competitions following sacrificial rituals performed by shamans (and later Buddhist monks) has the purpose of being a gift for nature in the hopes that nature reciprocates. This kind of exchange of gifts can be seen as negotiation with the powers of nature (which is very similar to the typical rituals of hunting tribes when they try to ensure that a hunt is successful). In these kinds of rituals the participants try to impersonate particularly strong animals like the eagle or lion. By this process, sympathetic magic, one can gain strength from the impersonated animals. As so it is probable that many of the customs in wrestling originate from such hunting rituals. Krist (2014) gives an example of this by

describing the Eagle dance that every wrestler does before and after a wrestling match. By his accord this is a clear example of sympathetic magic, where there is a belief that doing the Eagle dance ritual the wrestlers gain the strength of the eagle.

The origin of the Eagle dance was not clear for my interviewees. Trainer did however acknowledge that Eagle dance is universal ritual among Mongols with small differences between that different Mongolian people (like Inner Mongolians or Buryats) do during wrestling. He also suggested that it has no starting date or inventor as it is something that happened naturally and developed side by side with Mongolian wrestling.

Trainer: There is a similar dance in Inner Mongolia and Tuvan Republic. Maybe in Kalmykia and Buryatia. [...] Well, it is not the same. When the wrestling started, the dancing develop together with it. When you win the opponent, you run with happiness with your hands up in the air. Tradition has no inventor, you know what I mean?

Shaman on the other hand did know that the dances between different wrestling sports among Mongolians had different meanings. He is on the same line with Tomikawa (2005, 104), as he thinks that the Inner Mongolians imitate bulls and generally, in China they have other animals as well. He thinks that the Eagle dance is the old, original and traditional way to do it, and so the others have not maintained the tradition as well as Outer Mongolians (or Khalkhas).

Shaman: There is only one regulation for Mongolian wrestling that comes from ancient times. I mean there is only one flap of the falcon. Wrestlers of Inner Mongolia imitate the movement of fighting bulls. And also their costumes are different from Mongolian wrestlers. In China, they imitate the movement of the dragon, snow leopard and tiger. In Mongolia, we only imitate the flap of the falcon in order to save our tradition.

The wrestlers might not imitate only the hawks or falcons, even though Shaman states so. Krist (2014, 428) introduces the idea that conversion to Buddhism changed the meaning of the Eagle dance. While doing the Eagle dance, the wrestlers were no longer just imitating eagles, but the mythical Buddhist super-strong king of birds, Garuda. Nothing in the Eagle dance's appearance changed, but the mythical shamanistic context was replaced by a Buddhist one. This was supported by Trainer who concluded that during the dance the wrestlers would imitate "Khan Garuda flaps and falcon diving". Interestingly Second Lama thought that the Eagle dance represents eagles and falcons. As he did not mention

Garuda, it might be safe to assume that the idea of wrestlers imitating (or getting power from) only Garuda might not be so widely spread.

This is further evidence that indicates the fact that Eagle dance is an old ritual that predates the dividing of Mongolian peoples to different nation (and supranational) states. It can be derived from the fact that Tuvans and Buryats live in modern day Russia and Inner Mongolians in China, and they have been separated by national borders for hundreds of years. But they still share similar customs regarding to traditional wrestling. It seems more plausible that there has been existing rituals that somehow survived (in literature, stories or as a custom) at least in some form, in contrast to the other option that everything is fully invented (and copied from Outer Mongolia) after the fall of the Soviet Union. Wrestler also reinforces this by stating that communism did not significantly change the form of the Eagle dance.

Wrestler: Existed, existed. Fundamentally, it did exist [during communism]. Generally, the flapping and the heaping is modified a bit, the general rule itself is not changed, mostly everything is kept the same.

In a way the retraditionalization as a whole (including the Eagle dance and other aspects, like the cult of Chinggis Khaan) seemed to be some kind of taboo for Trainer and the Wrestler as they did not seem to acknowledge that this kind of process had been going on. They both said that wrestling has ancient roots and there had not been much, if any, change since the socialism. This seemed quite strange especially as Trainer had wrestled already during the late 1980s. It is always possible that my questions were misunderstood or maybe the literature describing the period is inaccurate. Petrov (2014, 414) states that the process of retraditionalization in Central Asian nations was more of redefinition and reinterpreting, not explicitly inventing. This might explain the position of the interviewees. There also can be other reasons (like belief that the retraditionalization is just going back to what it has always been) but my research does not properly cover these kinds of questions.

Eagle dance might have been sympathetic magic (where imitating the eagle would grant one its power) in the past, but this might not be the case today. The data that I collected seem to indicate the latter as there were no beliefs of this kind to be found. During all of my interviews I tested Krist's (2015, 425-426) claim about

gaining animal power, and asked my interviewees about the meaning of the Eagle dance. None of them seemed to think this to be true, even though Trainer informed that there is a belief that people might get power from the ranking system. The reason for performing Eagle dance seemed to be just a way to warm up (as the wrestlers did so as a warm up exercise while I was at their camp, although it might have been just a show for me) and to show your body and strength to the audience. The reasoning was mostly secular, not magical.

Trainer: There is no relation to any religion. Eagle dancing is some sort of preparation for the wrestling

He thought that Eagle dance had more to do with wrestling and showing wrestler's power, not so much with magic. Anyhow Wrestler and Shaman associated the Eagle dance with hiimori. Shaman thought that wrestlers are showing their hiimori, but Wrestler went further and said that Eagle dance will rise hiimori (which could be interpreted to support Krist's claim, but I do not think this is the case as hiimori works in different way than the basic sympathetic magic).

Wrestler: Oh, the wrestling is, now that this flappings and heapings have a meaning to compete with each other fairly without thinking bad deeds about each other. Therefore by going out with flappings, we get the 'kaif' as those say, the person feels the pleasure, the spirit [hiimori] rises and accumulates the energy.

Although Trainer strictly stated that Eagle dance has nothing to do with religion, Second Lama had a different view. He did not strictly say that Eagle dance is about religion, but he thought that wrestling itself was religiously connected. The games and matches are not just about who beats who, but the competition is somehow heavenly.

Second Lama: The power of the eagle, and the falcon, Mongolians believe is the king of the sky. It [Eagle dance] is showing the power. It is not only earth competition, but also heaven or sky

As a conclusion it is hard to say anything definite about the religious nature of the Eagle dance. It is a very old custom that clearly has some obvious religious connections, like possible imitation of Garuda, and some possible magical purpose. Like everything else, it seems to be connected to hiimori, but in the end the ritual might be more about showing your strength and body to the audience. It

might also be that the ritual has little other purpose or meaning derived outside of the ritual, it is clearly important by itself.

4.6 Chinggis Khaan: praying to standards while wrestling in Naadam

Eagle dance is not the only ritual done during wrestling (and events) that can be linked to religion. Wrestlers (especially the winning ones) also pray to the nine standards of Chinggis Khaan.

The standards of Chinggis Khaan are usually located around the middle of the wrestling arena, in a shrine-like apparatus, during the national Naadam games (Wrestler told that the standards are present only at the Ulaanbaatar Naadam games). The standards were brought into the arena by honorary guards dressed in traditional outfits during the 2017 Naadam. The wrestlers went around the standard (and shrine) before their first matches and sometimes they did the Eagle dance. The winning wrestlers also went over to the shrine after matches and after the last rounds some even prayed on the shrine. The shrine was removed ceremoniously after the event.²⁷

Krist (2014, 434-435) describes this tradition as a new one, from post-soviet times, and as a part of the national identity building process that is revolving around Chinggis Khaan. This idea was corroborated by Second Lama who also timed this ritual to modern times.

Second Lama: No, this is modern I think[?] The old time, before the revolution, we don't have that tradition. They just showed their respect to the lords and kings and other only monks. They [monks] usually sat in the main part of the circle [around the wrestlers].

The reason for these rituals was quite clear in Trainers mind. It is about paying respect to the state and not to religion (or even to wrestling). He in a way linked it with the (new) state cult and agrees with Krist (2014) and Second Lama on this issue.

Trainer: That is not related to wrestling at all. But, wrestlers dance around the 9 white banners. It means they are showing respect to the state.

²⁷ See also Krist 2014, 434.

Wrestler did however find more religious elements in the standards. As he acknowledged that the number nine (9) is an auspicious one, giving fortune, and it can be seen with the standards. The standards (and doing rituals around them) also represented being successful in national Naadam which can be seen as a huge accomplishment for a wrestler. In a way it could be compared as a ritual to standing on the podium at the Olympic Games, where only the best competitors can perform the ritual of standing still (and in some cases, singing their national anthem or doing other performances).

Wrestler: Oh, well Mongolians auspiciously appreciate number 9, now the 9 is very fortunate, spiritual, and it is regarded as a lucky number. I think, therefore, the nine-legged armories [the standards] is attended. And this is the [wish/dream of] every wrestler to go around, how is it; this is mounted only at the central stadium during the Mongolian State Naadam, so it means that many young men who could not win one round, cannot go around this. Then going around this is the dream of many young wrestlers. For me, I used to go around.

Shaman, too, explained the meaning of the standards by connecting them to the auspicious numbers and shamanistic gods. He also gave a hint that the standards themselves are part of an old tradition, but it was unclear to me whether he meant tradition of having them in wrestling games or just by general. He also stated that the banners are more about honouring Chinggis Khaan himself, not just the state, and in doing so he probably interpreted this ritual as a religious and traditional as the others had more secular thoughts about it.

Shaman: The 9 white banners are made up of the tail hair of 99 horses. In shamanism, there are 99 gods. The 9 white banners will be placed during Naadam festival. Chingis Khaan was dominating the half of world because of honoring those. There is also a black banner used in wartime. Mongolians believe that the black banner protects us. The banner is made of black horse tail hairs. It was a tradition handing on before 800 years [...] It means that we are comparing those with 99 gods.

Krist (2014, 428) also suggests that wrestling and the games or competitions (including Naadam) have a magical function. He uses the statements of Mongolian shepherds from 1978 and 1980 as a proof for his claim (so this cannot be the same function as with the standards, which were introduced later). The shepherds had told in an interview that “the games were organized so that ‘summer or winter be good’, ‘Luus sadbag (i.e. their protector deity) be not angry, the rainfall be high and the grass grow’ and for the respect of the deities, so that they bring people wealth, high rainfall and happiness’ and that ‘Luus sadbag gives

people nice weather in return for their holidays’.”. This indicates that the games (maybe just Naadam) have had a magical function in not so distant past. My interviewees did not seem to know about this function or they did not believe in it. First Lama acknowledged that some people might think this way, but he did not think that it was a Buddhist custom.

So it seems that the clearly visible and central standards of Chinggis Khaan had different meanings to different interviewees. It is clear that this practice is part of the national identity building process going on in Mongolia and it is visible in the national Naadam games. Others (like Shaman) see this as a part of their true religious affiliations, but others seem to think it is something added on top of wrestling, more secular than religious in its core nature.

4.7 Animal symbolism: wolf and the ranking system

Mongolian wrestling has a lot of symbolism related to animals and nature. Most importantly the ranking system is by most parts named according to different animals and their strengths. There is also symbolism that links the wolf to wrestling and hiimori, which I already discussed shortly in previous chapters. The Eagle dance has (or had) an obvious connection to animal symbolism, but that I covered earlier.

The wolf symbolism seems to be two-fold. First there is a belief that hunting a wolf (the worthiest of prey) will give you its fortune (hiimori) (Humphrey & Ujeed 2012, 155). This obviously increases a wrestler’s chance to win. Trainer also noted this connection.

Trainer: The wolf symbolizes the khiimori and fortune. The wolf fight for the living. It is so intelligent animal.

On the other hand, Second Lama told the story (see chapter 4.2 about karma) about a wrestler who skinned a wolf alive. This in turn decreased his karma and led to the downfall of the next generation of his family as they could not produce any wrestlers. There seems to be a dilemma brewing, as hunting a wolf improves hiimori (and thus the wrestling ability) but killing it in inappropriate manner lowers karma (and thus the wrestling ability). This indicates that killing a wolf is

not sufficient, but it must be treated in a right manner, if one is to reap all the benefits.

It also could be that these two beliefs are not compatible or comparable and they are entirely part of different discourses. Humphrey & Ujeed (2012, 156) state that in the event of losing (or exhausting) hiimori, the causes are not attributed or linked to the karmic system of Buddhism. This idea is reinforced by the fact that there have been hunters driving around Ulaanbaatar and displaying bloody carcasses of wolves on top of their cars. (Humphrey & Ujeed 2012, 155-156) This seems to be an action that would affect your karma negatively and still people have done it in order to show off their prize (and hiimori).

Tomikawa (2005, 105) states that there is a belief, or a legend, that a wolf makes its nest into a strong wrestler's chest after his death. This belief might be alive only in Inner Mongolia as there was no mention of anything like this during my interviews. In any case it is clear that wolf is a revered animal and it is closely linked with wrestling in different ways. There are stories about wrestlers and wolves, people killing wolves for hiimori and people treating wolves right so they (and the generations to come) can be successful wrestlers.

Like mentioned before, the ranking system is named after different animals or mythical creatures. In short, the national (highest level) ranks go accordingly, from lowest to highest: falcon, hawk, elephant, Garuda (a mythical bird), lion and giant. After the giant there are some rare cases where people have gotten higher ranks and they are named after different kinds of giants. (Interviews with Trainer; Naadam festival official website: wrestler titles²⁸)

The ranking system is based in the different abilities of these animals, as the animals represent different characteristics that are seen on the wrestlers. The animals have also hierarchies between each other (e.g. one eats another) which are part of the natural order.

Shaman: The falcon moves so fast to eat other animals. The movement of falcon is so fast. For the elephant, it moves slowly. But the elephants are stronger than falcons. For the lion, they eat elephants, not falcons. We gave the title for wrestlers according to the animal's

²⁸ <http://naadamfestival.com/the-three-games/mongolian-wrestling/wrestlers-titles>

power. [...]The title named bird of Indian mythology [Garuda] expresses its movement and strong state.

Trainer gives a very similar statement about the animals. The birds are fast, elephant is big and strong. In brief they are “the strongest animal names in the world”. He also added that there is a belief that the wrestlers themselves get power from these rankings. When you are a national elephant you get the power of a (national) elephant. This might be a case of imitative magic in extreme, where just having a name of a strong animal gives you its power. He also stated that the responsibilities wrestlers have, grow with the rank, in a way repeating the old saying: “with great power comes a great responsibility”.

It is not surprising that Wrestler also gave a very similar account of the ranking system as Trainer and Shaman. He goes little bit off the script and links the animals to hiimori. In his opinion the animals are named after their power, auspiciousness and hiimori. He also gives a different view on gaining power from the ranks. In his mind the rank does not itself give you power, but it might give a mental advantage as it is obtained by hard work. As such, his answer to my question about getting power from the animals was quite clear and informative.

Wrestler: No, fundamentally by achieving the title, one becomes more inspired, gains more mental strength and the Zaan [elephant] title is accomplished by extraordinarily hard work, right. Thus when obtaining the Zaan title, the sportsman gains a lot of mental power.

So there are some quite notable differences between the interviewees: Wrestler thinks that there is no religious power coming from the animal, but Trainer notes that there is this kind of belief around Mongolian wrestling. Shaman on the other hand has a quite different view as he declares that there is no difference between hiimori among differently ranked wrestlers. This is in a way contradictory to the whole idea of hiimori, as presented in the previous chapter, but his statement could be understood (and how I understand it) to back the idea that there is no power (or hiimori in this case) coming from just having a rank.

The ranking system also includes the Buddhist king of birds, Garuda. This rank is usually given to the second ranking wrestler in the National Naadam tournament. It is interesting because it is clearly a legendary (mythical) animal, unlike the others that are animals found in nature. It comes from Buddhist mythology and so feels a little out of place compared to the other natural animals.

Trainer concludes that Garuda is a “new rank” and Shaman describes it as bird coming from “Indian mythology”, not Mongolian. Wrestler did not mention anything like this, and Lamas did note that Garuda is a Buddhist entity, but they did not know why it was as part of the rankings. It could be argued that there is a sentiment that Garuda is a later (and even possibly foreign) addition to the system of animals used for ranking wrestlers. There could have been a historical process where Buddhist beliefs were incorporated into traditional (shamanistic ones) in a similar way as the symbolism in the Eagle dance might have changed (from eagle to Garuda) with the influx of Buddhist beliefs (Krist 2014, 428).

The rank of giant for those who have won twice, and other giants for men who have more national Naadam championships than two, are also exceptions in the ranking system of animals. I tried to investigate if the giant is a mythical figure in a similar way as Garuda, but I could not find anything similar. The interviews revealed that the giant could also mean champion or greatest, one of my translators also emphasized that it could mean strongest, biggest or something on those lines. So the Mongolian word for “giant” does not clearly translate to English, which means that there might not even be a reason to look for a mythical giant.

The ranking system has clear connections to mythical and religious thinking. One of the ranks is straight from Buddhist mythology and the animals represent different abilities and powers which then represents the wrestlers holding said rank. Even though my interviewees had somewhat different opinions about the ranking system, it is clearly one of the clearest links between Mongolian wrestling and Mongolian religions.

4.8 Summary

As the web of Mongolian wrestling and its connections to religion are quite complex so I created a summarizing image (figure 1) that helps to understand all of this. This image also in a way gives an answer to the question I stated in the beginning. How does religion affect a wrestler’s ability to wrestle, or in other

words, what kind of religious elements key in becoming a successful Mongolian wrestler?

It must be stated that the interviewees were not in line with everything discussed here and the information gained from them was in many ways contradictory. Also previous research was in some cases in conflict with statements made by the interviewees, so the summary does include some ideas that were not accepted by all sources.

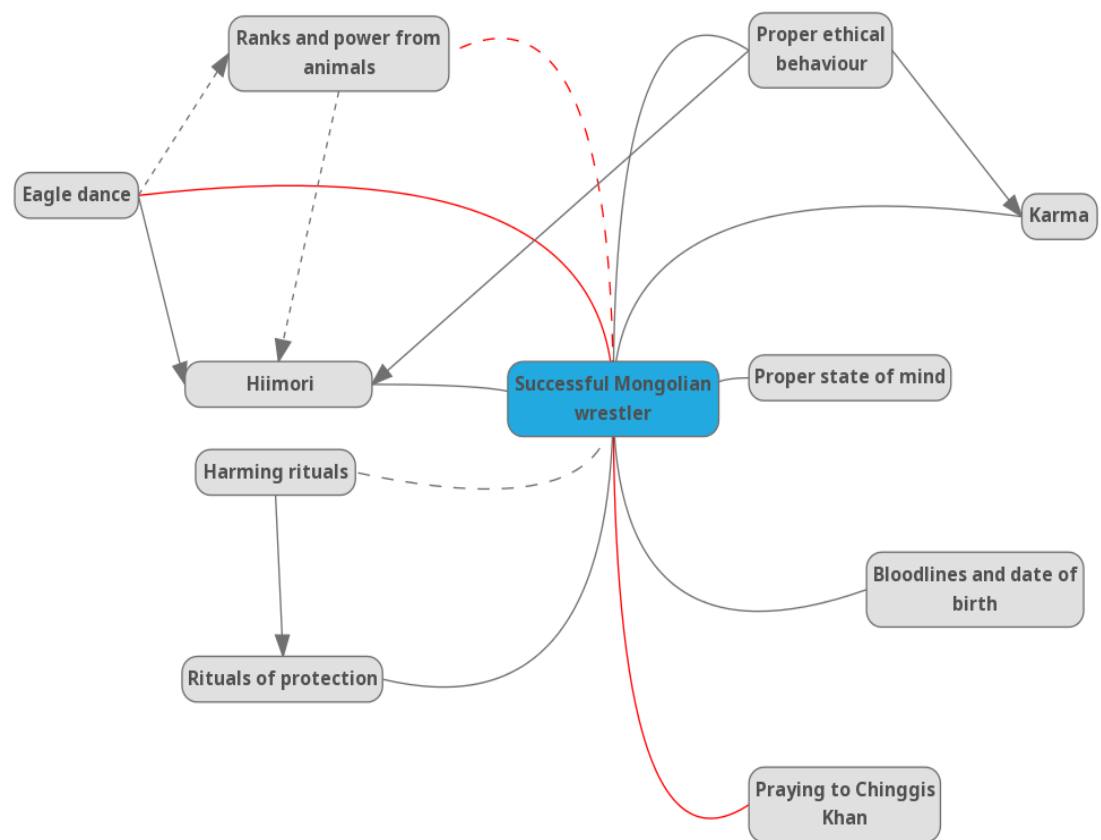


Figure 1: the complex relation of religion and wrestling.²⁹

In the picture the straight lines imply a meaningful connection that has a function in becoming a successful wrestler. The dotted lines imply that there is a possible connection, but it is controversial according to my research. The lines with arrows mean that there is a connection between these categories, other than wrestling. For example proper ethical behaviour raises hiimori, but this rising of hiimori is not in itself any way linked to wrestling (only through hiimori). The red lines indicate that successful wrestlers participate in these rituals, but they might not affect their

²⁹ Made with <https://app.mindmup.com>

ability to wrestle, they are just indicators that one is successful. Red dotted line means that there might be a controversial connection that might affect the wrestling ability, and it is an indicator that the wrestler is successful.

Of the main components, *hiimori* seems to have the clearest connection to success, as there is no success without it, but it itself is not enough for success. It is also connected with plethora of rituals and religious ideas, like training in auspicious places and doing divinations. Wrestling in itself is also seen to increase *hiimori*. *Hiimori* seems to be connected to magical thinking so wrestling can be interpreted to have a magical function (through *hiimori* and beliefs that you can touch a *hiimori* rich wrestler to gain his power and so on) in present day Mongolia, but maybe not a sympathetic function in the way Krist (2014, 425-426) is suggesting. Eagle dance was also connected to *hiimori* as it was a ritual where a man can show his *hiimori* and even raise it.

Karma, bloodlines and date of birth all included historical elements to them. These are categories that affect the wrestlers in way that is totally out of his control. If you are born as a wrestler (through bloodlines, karma and/or auspicious date) then you might become a successful wrestler through means that are not possible for others. Present day actions (including ethical behaviour) also affect karma, which then impacts a wrestler's ability to win.

Proper ethical behaviour and proper state of mind are ideas heavily influenced by Buddhism. Ethical actions can raise *hiimori*, but they were also seen necessary for a wrestler to succeed outside the *hiimori* discussion. Proper state of mind means that a wrestler must have some qualities in him (e.g. self-control) that are required to succeed in a match.

Harming rituals are quite controversial, but they are clearly connected to the protecting rituals (as they can help against harm and harming rituals). Harmful rituals are in contrast to the idea of proper ethical conduct, which is seen necessary. Protection from harmful energies and injuries is necessary and the rituals of protection provide this.

The clearest religious indicator that someone is a wrestler is the Eagle dance, as this is done by all the wrestlers during competition. In a way it is an inevitable part of a successful wrestler's ritualistic activity as everyone who competes has to do it. It is by default linked to successful wrestlers. Eagle dance also has a possible connection with the category of gaining power from animals. Krist (2014) implies that the ritual has a sympathetic magical function, which was not corroborated by my interviewees.

Praying to the shrine of Chinggis Khaan might be just an expression of respect to the state, but it is only done by the best of the wrestlers, as the shrine is present only in the national Naadam in Ulaanbaatar and praying is usually done after winning. So it is a clear sign that someone has been successful as a wrestler.

The ranking system is also a clear sign of a wrestler's success. If you are ranked high you have been successful in competition (as there is no other way to gain these ranks) and according to some, you might also gain hiimori and powers from animals you represent. This category is also partly unclear as the interviewees who talked about it said different things.

5. Conclusions

In this last chapter I will return to my research question and to the problems in answering it. I will also describe a fictional successful wrestler, so that the results become more lifelike, as this study is not just about theoretical possibilities but also about the real men who are wrestling during Naadam. Later I will discuss questions which were not answered, the meaning of my results in context of other research and shortcomings that might affect the reliability of this research.

5.1 Answering the question and painting a portrait

Kofi Annan once said in a speech, that “there are no easy answers and very few uncontested ones” (United Nations: 2004 speech of Kofi Annan³⁰). This age old wisdom seems to be painfully true with the results of my thesis. There are no clear religious elements which solely would be enough to make someone a great

³⁰ <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2004-10-18/secretary-general-kofi-annan%E2%80%99s-tip-o%E2%80%99neill-lecture-%E2%80%99Cleaning-lessons>

wrestler, instead there are several contested religious elements that factor into making a successful wrestler. As can be clearly seen in the summary and figure 1.

To answer the main question: “what kind of religious elements are key to becoming a successful Mongolian wrestler?” I would have to state that the main components (or elements) are karma, hiimori, right state of mind, right ethical behaviour, protecting rituals, bloodlines and date of birth. These categories are influenced by Buddhist and shamanistic beliefs, which are dominant in the Mongolian religious landscape. One of the element is clearly more important and necessary than the others, that of hiimori. This is a component is always present when someone succeeds, so it is an essential and inevitable part of any successful wrestler.

What kind of a man is a successful wrestler? First and foremost he has other successful wrestlers in his family (preferably on the mother’s side) and he was born during the right time of the year in Mongolia. He had good karma in previous life, so he can be big, strong and successful in this life. Hiimori is something that he is constantly seeking and doing deeds that raise it. He will train hard in auspicious places, like in those that are linked to Chinggis Khaan, and he will train with other hiimori rich people. Acting properly and doing religious rituals (like reading mantras) will be part of his routines as there is no place for wrong doers in the fields of glory. Before competition he will consult shamans and monks so that they can ward him from harm and injuries (possibly summoned by other people). During the competition he will win and show respect while controlling his mind. Before and after matches he will do the Eagle dance, and in the national Naadam in Ulaanbaatar he will show respect to the state by praying at the altar of Chinggis Khaan. When he wins he will get a rank that is visible in his hat and his hiimori will be spread around as people touch him. He will leave his mark into history, not only by being a winning wrestler, but also by increasing the chances there will be more successful wrestlers in his family.

This picture shows that becoming a successful wrestler is not just a lifelong project, but also has elements from previous lives and has features that cannot be controlled by the wrestler. There are several religious elements from start to finish

and these are not optional but perquisites for success, in the end there is no path to success that is void of religious context.

5.2 Impact of the results and questions left unanswered

It is clear that the material I collected is unique and my study gives a new window in to the world of Mongolian wrestling. Integrating my findings into the prior research was problematic from time to time. The study also opened some new questions that could be researched in the future.

First, the information that I collected is contradictory (in itself) in some questions and there is no clear consensus among the interviewees. This means that sometimes my material contrasts parts of previous research but in the same time it supports findings made by other authors. On the other hand this exact question has not been discussed previously so there are some new findings that neither contradict nor support previous literature, but add a new layer of knowledge into the relationship of Mongolian wrestling and religion.

Integrating the results into prior research has also been challenging as some researchers have discussed Mongolian wrestling as a group of different sports (different wrestling styles practiced by different Mongolian peoples that are more or less similar) and I have made a distinction between all of these sports. It means that my results apply only into Khalka bukh, the style that is wrestled in the national Naadam in Ulaanbaatar, while other researchers' results might apply to a larger group of wrestling styles.

It can be argued that the historical separation between different Mongolian people and the identity building process has been different in different localities and wrestling has been affected by this. For example it seems plausible that China (where Inner Mongolia resides and millions of Mongolians live) has influenced the wrestling sport in which Inner Mongolians compete in. China has integrated some forms of martial arts into its vocational education and these martial arts schools have thousands of students (over 70 000 just in Dengfeng) (Dong 2017, 253). The state of China has actively taken part in modernization (which can be interpreted as a Chinese form of sambofication) of traditional Chinese martial arts,

so it has a track record of changing the essences (and outer forms) of martial arts (Filipiak 2010, 37-38). Based on this it seems possible to assume that there have been some developments that have made the different wrestling (Mongolian and Inner Mongolian wrestling) sports dissimilar. This would also explain the differences in descriptions of rules and customs that can be found in prior research, but which have not been addressed sufficiently.³¹ I propose that the different wrestling styles among Mongolians should be differentiated and discussed in a way that allows the reader to follow what style is in question (as I have done in this thesis). They are clearly similar and have a common ancestry and there are places where they could be discussed together as one (like when discussing about ancient history), but when the focus is on modern day sports, differentiation is needed.

If the proposal is accepted (that the styles are different sports and they might have different cultural meanings) it opens up new paths for research and it will be important to find the differences and similarities among these traditions. Finding those and analyzing the historical process of change could give new insight into the question of how new traditional wrestling styles are born from a common ancestry. The way identity is moulded through wrestling is also something that needs differentiation. It is plausible that the cultural meanings of traditional sports differs from country to country. Also being an ethnic minority³² (like in Inner Mongolia or Buryatia) might guide a sport into a direction that cannot be seen in a place where the sport is embraced by the ethnic majority (Mongolia). But to answer these, there must be a way to separate these sports.

In some issues my findings challenge prior research in a significant way. The meaning of Eagle dance is an example of this (see chapter 4.5), where Krist (2014) attributes a sympathetic magical function to the dance, but this could not be validated by my research. Previous research focusing on wrestling has also not discussed properly the meaning of hiimori. In my material hiimori was significant and it was widely discussed. I suggest that when Mongolian wrestling is discussed cultural and religious context, hiimori should be considered. When the amount of

³¹ See Tomikawa 2006, Chang 2009 and Krist 2014.

³² For example Shimamura (2004) has studied the Buryat minority in Mongolia and the identity building progress after socialism. This gives a precedent that at least in Mongolia, minorities have a different way of building identity than the majority of the population.

knowledge on Mongolian wrestling and hiimori accumulates, it should be used as a part of future research.

I do not have any information of studies about Mongolian wrestling and religion done in Mongolian or other languages that would answer the question set in this study. This raises the questions: Has this been done before and if it has, what were the results? Are my arguments and suggestions valid in a larger (and probably native) field of study? Answering this would require collaboration between English, Mongolian, Russian and Chinese speaking scholars.

There are other important questions left unanswered, as my data is too limited discuss them. First it would be important to know how Mongolians without strong religious and wrestling afflictions (as all my interviewees were experts in either wrestling or religion) would answer the question set in this study. So how does a common Mongolian or a fan or wrestler see the connection between successful wrestlers and religion? The answers might vary from my results, but I think there is a genuine possibility that my results are part of common religious thinking among Mongolians. Other important question left unanswered is the question of competing elements. How well does karma and hiimori work together in wrestling context or are they in some places incompatible (like some of my interviewees and Humphrey & Ujeed (2012, 156) indicate) or conflicting? If there is a conflict is it just between Buddhist monks and shamans or within the religious thinking of common Mongolians or wrestlers? To answer this, a much larger group of interviewees from different fields of life would be needed.

The credibility of my data can also be questioned. As mentioned before I had some ethical shortcomings that might have affected the interviews. Also the number of interviewees was very small which increases the risk of a distorted view in comparison to general consensus. On the other hand the interviewees were randomly chosen (not by choice but by necessity) experts and they answered in different ways to same questions, and this thesis is not about consensus. It is about integrating the statements collected into prior research, thus enlarging the English field of Mongolian wrestling studies, and answering new questions with the collected data. So this thesis is as much about the individual interviewees and their answers as it is about general information on Mongolian wrestling.

Even with the problems of reliability, the methods I used seemed to work well in this kind of study. The field work was a necessity and thematic interview was a good method to collect material. There is an argument to be made in favour of more structured interview methods. But I think that the openness of the conversations gave me more information than I could have achieved using more structured questions.³³ Theory directed content analysis worked well in categorization of the content, as my goal was to integrate my results into prior research.

I propose two things for future studies about Mongolian wrestling and religion: 1. Differentiate between different wrestling styles, and 2. Include hiimori into the analysis. I wrote this thesis with those concepts in mind, and in spite of all difficulties and shortcomings, this proved to be a beneficial way to answer the research question as well as to open up new questions.

While laying devastated on a wrestling mat I have many times heard someone ask the age old, and probably common, question “what do I have to do to be a better wrestler?”. Now with this thesis I have inadvertently found an answer to this question: go pray to your gods, treat people well, train where you were born and hope that you have good wrestlers in your family. Remember to train a lot with good wrestlers, as this is an excellent way increase hiimori. Just do not go against Mongolians, they are born to wrestle.

³³ Also the non-formal nature helped with people, as playing football and talking about wrestling moves was a prequel for the real questions, that I probably would not have ever gotten into without some “not so scientific” time with the interviewees.

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